John Langan

The Collected Short Fiction

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of
John Langan

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On Skua Island

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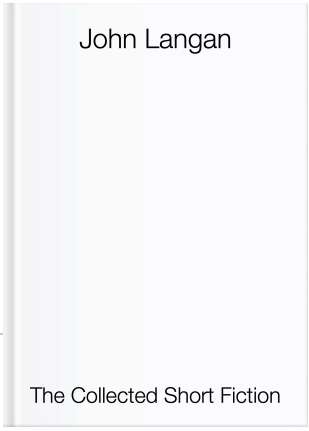

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The story had held us, round the dinner table, sufficiently breathless, but except the obvious remark that it was weird, as, on a February night in an old house with a strong storm howling off the ocean, a story should essentially be, I remember no comment uttered till the eight of us adjourned to the living room with our drinks. There Fiona, my fiancée, noted it as the first time she had heard anyone number a tale that could be classified under the rubric of the zombie story among his own experiences. Whereupon Griffin, the story's narrator, hastened to repeat, for the third or possibly the fourth time, that much of the substance of what he had related was as it had been related to him on the beach by old Anthony, the fisherman, when everything was over, and although he, Griffin, indeed had seen what he was sure was DeBoer's white body through the green trees, the local doctor had been unable or unwilling to fix DeBoer's time of death with any certainty, so that the glimpse of him might have been a last look at a doomed, but still living, man.

"But do you believe that?" Kappa, our hostess, asked Griffin, who shrugged and looked sheepishly at his port.

Jennifer, curled on one of the large wicker chairs, said, "You have to admit, most of the stories you hear in a setting like this—" She waved her hand for emphasis and, as if in response, the wind gusted to a shriek, rattling the windows and provoking a round of laughter from the rest of us. "Very nice," she said, "you see: I told you I had powers. You have to admit, the kind of story you tend to hear, which I guess means the kind of story people tend to know, is the ghost story. Isn't that true? Get my mother started, and she'll tell you about her Uncle Richard, who saw the woman next door two

days after she died, when he was out behind the house, chopping wood. She was floating three feet off the ground; his hair turned completely white on the spot."

"What happened to her?" Fiona asked.

"The woman? Who knows? She floated away. The point is, it's a ghost story." She turned to me. "Come on, Mr Horror-story-writer, back me up on this."

"Ghost stories are popular," I said. "It does seem as if everyone knows one. Certainly you find more so-called serious writers trying their hands at ghost stories than you do stories about vampires, or mummies, or—" with a nod to Griffin, who returned it "—zombies."

"I don't know," Fiona said. "I just spent the past semester teaching Henry James—a lot of Henry James—and, let me tell you, there's a pretty fair amount of vampiric activity going on in old Henry's works, especially a book like *The Sacred Fount.*"

"Granted," I said, "but he never wrote about mummies."

Bob, our host, said, "I wonder why that was," looking at Fiona, who answered, "It wasn't flexible enough: he couldn't adapt the idea of the mummy (mummyism?) to his type of story the way he could adapt the idea of the vampire, vampirism."

"Can anyone?" Jennifer asked. "I mean, how many big mummy novels have there been? It's not like the vampire: for a while there, it seemed like every other book, movie, and TV show was about vampires, for crying out loud."

"And frequently from the vampire's point of view," Bob added.

"I know, really, like I'm going to identify with this walking corpse that spends his nights sucking people's blood out of little holes in their necks. Hello! Whose brainstorm was this? Anyway, regardless of what I may have thought, they were very popular. And you've had God only knows how many of those zombie movies, those *Dead* movies, *Night of the Living Evil Dead from Hell Part III* or whatever, not to mention movies about the devil and possession and witches and toxic monsters—but we were talking about

books, weren't we? Well, I'm sure you've had books about all those things, too, haven't you?" She looked at me.

"More or less," I said.

"And werewolves: this one—" she gestured at me with her wine glass "—is working on a werewolf thing. It's very good. Are you done with it yet?"

"Not yet," I said.

"He's been very busy with the semester," Fiona said.

"We've got the great werewolf novel—sorry, I know I'm not supposed to call it that—we've got the great werewolf story coming, too, but what about the mummy?"

"The mummy is different," I replied. "It's a relic from a different time, the imperial age, from when the sun never set on the British Empire. Has anyone read any of the original mummy stories, the ones Arthur Conan Doyle wrote?" Only Bob nodded. "I shouldn't call them the original stories; I don't know for sure whether they are or not. I assume they were among the first. Anyway, Conan Doyle's mummy is very different from what we're accustomed to when we hear that name; at least, from what I think of. His mummy is a weapon. There's an obnoxious student of obscure foreign languages at Oxford who buys one that he keeps in his apartment for use against his enemies. He can read the spell that animates the mummy and sends it to do your bidding, which in his case usually involves disposing of the latest person who's annoyed him."

"Talk about Revenge of the Nerds," Jennifer said.

"What happens to him?" Fiona asked.

"Fortunately, a fellow student figures out what's going on and forces him to destroy the mummy, cut it up with dissecting knives and burn it together with the papers that brought it to life."

"How does he manage that?" Jennifer asked. "You would think the guy would just sick the mummy on him."

"He goes armed, with a gun."

"Oh. I guess that would do the trick."

“Indeed. I haven’t made any kind of exhaustive survey, but that seems to be how the mummy first enters English literature. I wonder if it doesn’t express some kind of anxiety, or even guilt, about the whole imperial enterprise, particularly with regard to the museums. The mummy seems so much a creature of the museum, doesn’t it? You imagine it shuffling through the museum after dark, one loose bandage trailing along the floor behind it. Where does that image come from? It must be a scene in a film, I suppose. But it’s as if the mummy embodies a kind of doubt the British had about removing all those antiquities from their rightful locations and shipping them to London for display, as if they suspected the morality of their actions—”

“Or as if they were afraid of contamination,” Fiona said.

“Mmm,” Bob said. “Who knows what you’re going to bring into the country?”

“Right, you have to be careful,” I said. “That could be it, too, like *Dracula*. Watch out what you unload from the boats.”

“*Dracula?*” Jennifer asked.

“There are those who see *Dracula* as sublimating a fear of rabies,” Bob answered, “a fear of England becoming diseased through its contact with other, particularly very distant and very foreign, places.”

“I see,” Jennifer said. “Thank you, Bob. You’re right about the mummy: we don’t think about it in terms of the story you described. We think of it as a love story, am I right? It starts in ancient Egypt, with a priest who’s in love with the wrong person: the pharaoh’s wife, or his sister—or weren’t their sisters their wives? Anyway, he’s in love with someone he’s not supposed to be, so as a punishment for his *hubris*—see, I do remember something from Bob’s class—he’s mummified. Could you say he’s mummified alive?”

“Well, technically mummification was something that was done to you after you were dead,” Bob said. “But hey—why not?”

“All right then: Bob has given me permission to use the phrase ‘mummified alive.’ So the priest is buried in the desert, where he’s forgotten about for the next four to five thousand years, until a bunch of clueless archaeologists, or I guess they’d be Egyptologists, find him, bring him to the museum, and turn him loose.”

“Which usually involves his trying to find the reincarnation of his lost love,” I added.

“Yes, who just happens to be the woman the hero’s in love with, too. Convenient, that. The mummy kidnaps her and carries her to the Egypt room at the museum, which he has set up for the ceremony that will return his lost love’s soul to the heroine’s body. Luckily, the hero has figured all this out, and he shows up at the museum just in time to foil the mummy’s plans. And get the girl. The mummy winds up incinerated.”

“That’s Hollywood,” Fiona said, shaking her head, “everything becomes a romance.”

“What’s wrong with romance?” I asked, receiving in reply a sour expression. “Well,” I said, “certainly the film versions of the mummy story tend to rob it of the deeper implications you find in the earlier written stories. The mummy becomes another monster, his Egyptian origins so much window-dressing.”

Bob said, “The Egyptian associations had no resonance for Americans.”

“Not the same resonance,” Fiona said. “For America, Egypt was just another exotic location.”

“So that’s it?” Jennifer asked. “The mummy is dead? There’s nothing anyone can do with it? Him? It?”

“This is all very nice,” Kappa said, “and very educational, I can assure you. But isn’t it a bit off track? We were talking about things that actually had happened to people, not movies and books.”

Bob nodded, and Jennifer said, “You’re absolutely right, Kappa, we were talking about actual events.”

“So,” I said, glancing round the company gathered there in the living room, my eyebrows raised for effect, “does anyone have a mummy story they’d care to share?”

There was a pause during which the wind fell off, and then a voice said, “I do.”

We looked about to see who had spoken, and our eyes settled on Nicholas, who had been introduced at the start of our stay at the Cape house as an old friend of Bob’s from Harvard and who had maintained an almost unbroken

silence in the five days since, departing the house for hours at a time on walks whose destination he shared with no one, but which appeared to take him inland, away from the beach and the winter-angry ocean. His face was buried under twin avalanches of white hair, one descending from the tangled mass crowning his head, the other rising from the tangled mass hugging his jaw, but his hooded eyes were a pale bright blue that I should have described as arctic. For dress, he favored a pair of worn jeans and a yellowed cable-knit sweater, which he supplemented with a long grey wool coat and boots that laced up just short of his knees for his jaunts outside. In reply to a question Jennifer had posed our first morning there, while Nicholas was out, Kappa had informed us that Nicholas was an archaeologist whose particular interest was the study of the Vikings, which was the basis upon which his friendship with Bob had been founded when they met at Harvard. Although they had maintained contact over the years, it was not uncommon for Nicholas to disappear on some expedition or another for months at a time, and occasionally longer, which was part of the reason Kappa assumed he never had married. He did not speak much: this we had witnessed ourselves as Jennifer, who prides herself on being able to have a conversation with any living human being, availed herself of every opportunity to ask Nicholas questions, about himself, his career, what he was engaged in currently, that he answered in monosyllables when possible, clipped phrases when not, his voice when he spoke the sandpapery rasp of one unaccustomed to frequent speech. Now he was sitting on a dining-room chair he had positioned at the group's perimeter, between the dining room and the living room, a long-necked bottle of beer cradled in his hands. We shifted in our respective seats to face him, and he repeated, "I do; I have a mummy story."

"You do?" Bob asked.

"Well," Jennifer said, "I'm sure we'd all love to hear your story, Nicholas."

"Why don't you come a bit closer?" Kappa offered, but Nicholas made no effort to move.

"You have a mummy story?" Fiona asked, to which Nicholas nodded vigorously in reply. "Yes," he said, "yes, I think you'd have to call it that."

Possessed by a sudden impulse, I asked, “Would you tell us your story, Nicholas?” which appeared to be the cue for which he had been waiting: he began to speak, his voice scraping like a machine that had been but seldom used for an exceedingly long time. It strengthened, his voice, as he continued speaking; at the end of the hour and a half, or perhaps it was two hours, his story took, it sounded almost pleasant, the kind of voice that would have been at home delivering lectures to large groups of students at a university. The story he told would not have found a home at a university, however: it was the kind of story that is suited to a February night in an old house with a strong storm howling off the ocean. When his tale was completed, we retired to bed without much comment. I do not think any of us slept soundly that night; I know I did not. In the dark, I lay beside my fiancée listening to the wind moaning at our window, to the ocean smashing itself on to the beach, and when at last I slept I dreamed of a dark island, and gnarled hands reaching up, out of the water, to choke me.

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This happened twenty-five years ago (Nicholas said). Immediately after, and for years, I thought the memory of it would never fade. I was sure the memory would never fade: it was burned into my brain. But the surface on to which it was burned has worn away over the last quarter-century, and now the memory doesn’t seem as deeply engraved.

I was at the University of Aberdeen on a faculty exchange program. I was supposed to be delivering weekly lectures and meeting with students for tutorial sessions, but I was able to pass the bulk of those duties off on a bright young assistant someone at the university, probably the department chair, had decided to assign me. His name was Bruce; as I recall, he was from Greenock, a town on the west coast. Bruce delivered my lectures, which was to say he gave lectures he had researched and written and I told him I had read and approved, and Bruce took care of my tutorials. He was very eager. I was, too: I was using the free time Bruce allowed me to make trips all over the country to do research for a book I was writing on the Viking presence in Scotland, a subject I considered, and still do, vastly understudied. I would leave the university for anywhere from a day to a week at a time—well, I was away for a week only once, and that was to

take part in a dig on Skye that an old friend of mine from undergrad was running. Nothing disastrous ever happened while I was gone, and I thought Bruce would benefit from all the experience.

When I returned from a trip, I spent a day organizing my notes, then another couple of days writing. I wrote from eight in the morning till four in the afternoon, stopping for a half-hour lunch some time between eleven and one, depending on how the writing was proceeding. At four, I pushed my chair away from the typewriter and left my cold flat for a warm pub, usually one just down the street called The Tappit Hen. Most days, Bruce would join me to fill me in on how the latest lecture or tutorial had gone. I would nod at whatever he told me, not really listening to him, and say, “Sounds like you’re doing fine.” This pleased him what seemed to me an inordinate amount. I was flattered, yes, but I was also annoyed, maybe more annoyed than flattered. A number of significant discoveries concerning the Viking role in British history had broken in the last couple of years, and I had not been involved, not even remotely, in any of them. I had only been aware one of them was in progress. The picture of myself I saw in Bruce’s broad freckled face reminded me acutely how far my reality was from his ideal.

Bruce was with me when the man from MI-5 pulled up a stool at the table. I assume he was from MI-5; I didn’t ask and he didn’t volunteer the information. He was affiliated with some type of intelligence operation, of that much I was sure. His skin was bad, his teeth were bad, and he wore his hair in a crew cut. He was carrying an old briefcase that he swung up onto the table and unsnapped, but did not open. He verified my identity, did not bother with Bruce’s, and gave his name as Green. There were no handshakes. He had sought me out, Green said, because he thought I might be able to help him. He propped open his briefcase and withdrew from it a large envelope which he slid across the table to me, asking me to have a look at its contents and tell him what I thought.

The envelope held a dozen or so large black-and-white photographs. The first few were of an island, not a very large one from the look of it, a rocky beach and a couple of hills. There was a shape on top of one of the hills, the one to the right in the picture: what looked like a stone column. My guess was correct: the next photos showed a tall, narrow column that was covered from top to bottom in runes. A couple of the pictures were clear and close

enough for me to have a good look at some of the runes, and when I did my heart started to knock in my chest. I had not seen runes like these before: there were certain family resemblances to runes I knew from parts of Eastern Norway, enough for me to be able to read a couple of words and phrases here and there, but there were also striking variations, and more than a few characters that were completely new, unprecedented. You may be surprised to hear that not once did I doubt these pictures' authenticity, but that was the case. I looked at Green and asked him where this was.

"So you're interested?" he asked. I said I was, and he told me that the island in these photographs was located north-northwest of the Shetlands, an hour and a half's boat ride from the nearest human habitation. The place was called Skua Island, and if I thought that artifact of any archaeological significance, he and his employers—his term—were prepared to send me there to study it within two weeks, as soon as school let out for Christmas holiday.

Of course I was suspicious. People don't just approach you in a pub and offer to pay your way to unearthing a potentially historic find. Did I say unearthing? Yes: that was what one of the segments of writing I could read said, that there was something buried underneath this column, something I immediately thought might be the remains of a nobleman or hero. Even if what lay below the column wasn't that exciting, the column itself was: among the runes were characters that I thought I recognized as ancient Greek, and a couple that resembled pictographs I had seen on scrolls on display at the Met, in New York, in the Egyptian wing. I saw myself invited to lecture at Oxford, at the Sorbonne, on my earth-shaking discovery. And if that discovery had been arranged and financed by an intelligence organization, what difference did that make? I had heard of such partnerships in the past; it was impossible to go very far in the field in any direction without encountering them: a team was provided generous funding to go to Peru, or Morocco, or Indonesia, and in exchange all they had to do was answer a few questions on their return, plot out the route they had taken through the mountains on a map, share their photographs of the capital, the airport. It's been the way of the archaeological world since at least the Victorians, probably longer. Undoubtedly, I was needed on the island as a cover, a front for whatever operation required its use. Perhaps

they wanted to monitor the movements of Soviet submarines in the North Atlantic. If we could help each other, I saw no harm in it.

So I agreed, and even engaged to have Bruce accompany me as a reward for his slave labor. The morning after the last day of classes, the two of us were flown in a small plane from Aberdeen to the Shetlands, where we were introduced to the rest of our crew, eleven men whose posture and crew cuts bespoke their military associations as well as any uniform would have. I don't remember most of their names, only the leader's, Collins, whom I later heard the men address as "Major," and another, Joseph—I'm not sure if that was his first or last name—and a third, Ryan. Collins was older, by ten years at least, than his men, in his early- to mid-thirties. He was short and stocky, and his eyes were green and sharp. All the gear I had requested he had procured and had stored on board the fishing ship that had been hired to ferry us to the island. One thing I will say for the military: they are efficient. We ate lunch on the ship as it rode out of port.

By then it was three o'clock, and already the sky was darkening. I don't know if any of you have been that far north in the winter (Bob, I know you've been to Iceland, but wasn't that in the summer?), but the sun only puts in an appearance for a few hours a day, the fewer the closer to the Arctic Circle you venture. It goes without saying that the sea was rough. Rough! It was a heap of grey slabs heaving around us. Despite the pills we had swallowed with our lunches, Bruce and I were soon hanging over the ship's side, our lunches offerings to the sea. None of our companions seemed much affected. I remember that trip as a succession of flights and drops, the deck see-sawing beneath our feet, the ship's engine throbbing as it scaled one grey hill then slid down another, the waves striking the bow with a great hollow boom. We made better time than the season should have allowed, and it was just over an hour after we left port that Skua Island rose to our left. Ryan pointed it out to me, but my eyes already had found it. It wasn't more than a couple of hills that seemed barely taller than the waves swelling around us. Even given the hour and the failing light, the place seemed unusually dark. I searched the hill crests and located the column on the hill to the left, which meant that the photograph Green had shown me had been shot from the other side of the island. It was to there that we made our way. Seen from above, the island resembled a horseshoe, the opening

facing north and forming a bay that was only a little less choppy than the sea. The ship dropped anchor in the bay, and Bruce and I and the eleven soldiers packed our gear into bright yellow inflatable rafts that we rowed to shore. As we approached the beach, a great cloud of black-backed gulls, really, a surprising number for so small an island, rose into the wind, shrieking furiously. It's an enormous bird, the black-backed gull; as we pulled up on the beach, the flock hung there overhead screaming at us for what seemed a long time, before veering away.

The ship waited for us to land, then raised anchor and headed for home. In a week, it would be back to collect us. I had wanted longer, two weeks minimum with the possibility of a third should the need arise, but seven days was the best offer Green claimed to be empowered to make. So once we had carried our rafts across the beach, up and over a rise, up to the relative shelter of one of the hills, while Bruce and the men struck camp, I dug a flashlight out from a bag and set off for the column. I wanted to see it. The ground was soft, spongy: peat bog, covered with moss. The hill wasn't especially steep, but there was what felt like a hurricane-strength arctic wind blowing against me as I climbed, and by the time I reached the summit, such as it was, and the column, my face felt as if it had been peeled off.

The column was as tall as I was, a foot or so wide, struck from what appeared to be grey granite. I traced the flashlight beam up and down it, over the tightly bunched runes descending from its rounded top to a point beneath the ground's surface. I circled it, slowly, not caring that my face was not even numb any more, thinking about the men who had raised and carved it, about whatever they had buried underneath it. I knew little of them: I could venture a few educated guesses but I would remain largely in the dark until I had deciphered these runes and seen what the column covered; even then, there would be much I would not know. But standing there in front of their handiwork, the stars already glittering in the sky, I felt close to those strange men to an extent I had not experienced before, so much so that I would not have been surprised to have turned around and found one of them standing behind me, wrapped in a great fur cape. The secrets I was poised to uncover filled my head, as did the lectures waiting for me to deliver them at Cambridge, Berkeley. The wind was finally too

much for such revelry, however, so I quickly made my way back down to camp.

As I did, I thought of my father. I don't know if I ever told you about him, Bob; I don't think so. He had owned a hardware store in Ann Arbor when I was a child. Never terribly successful, he had slid into bankruptcy not too long after my mother died, my first year at Harvard. He had held a series of low-paying, low-skills jobs over the next couple of years, then wandered in front of the minister's Chrysler one unlucky Saturday afternoon. He had lingered in the hospital long enough for me to make the trip out to Michigan to sit by his bedside as he died. My older sister—her husband, actually—had to pay for the funeral and the tombstone. At some point in the next two days of standing around the funeral home, shaking the hands of people I hadn't seen in ten years or didn't remember, I had promised myself, pledged myself, that my life was not going to follow the same trajectory as his. I was not going to struggle at society's margins until the designated car arrived to strike me down. At other people's funerals, especially the funerals of those who are close to us, it's natural to think of our own funerals, our deaths, and I vowed that mine would be different from this drab, sparsely attended affair with which my father was sent to his eternal reward. When I died, people would sit up and take notice at my passing. I would be remembered. Sliding into my sleeping bag that first night on the island, on the brink of discovery, I thought I was at last on my way to realizing that pledge.

We were up and at the site early the next morning, while it still was dark. The wind had abated from the night before, but only somewhat; we stood with our backs to it as much as we could. Green had told me I could have seven men at my disposal, and seven men I had. I didn't see where the others went, nor did I care. I had decided to push ahead and excavate the column and whatever lay beneath it, a move I described to myself as bold but which was really premature, if not foolish, before I had deciphered the runes. But it was a move I felt Green's time constraints compelled me to. The men worked swiftly and well, including Collins, mostly under Bruce's supervision, as I copied down the column's inscriptions into a notebook that I pored over in our tent later that night, surrounded by all the dictionaries of ancient languages I owned or had been able to procure in the time before

our trip. The first order of business was to remove the column, which the men accomplished with what seemed remarkable ease within a day and a half. Among their other skills, they appeared to have had some training as engineers; perhaps that was why they had been selected for this trip. Perhaps it was part of the reason, anyway. The column descended another two feet into the ground; when it was out and lying on a blue tarpaulin, I spent the end of that afternoon and the beginning of the following morning inspecting the cavity that had held it before giving the go-ahead to start digging. Within five minutes of that command, none other than Bruce himself made our first discovery.

It was a sword, wrapped in the remnants of a cloth that melted when the air struck it. It was unlike any Viking weapon with which I was familiar, and I knew them all. Its rusted blade was easily a yard long. The hilt had been struck in the shape of a bird, its opened beak holding the blade, its outspread wings forming the exaggeratedly wide guard, its body the grip, and its talons the pommel. Through the peat clotted around the pommel, I saw bright green: scraping it clean with my fingers revealed an enormous emerald, clutched in the bird's claws. The style of the metalwork was completely foreign to me, as was the bird it was supposed to represent. It was no bird of prey, which is what you would expect for a sword. Joseph recognized it, however; it was a bonxie, a skua, the seagull-like bird from which this island had taken its name. Dreadful fierce birds, he said, especially when they were nesting. They would fly straight for you if you wandered in among their nests, peck your eyes out.

You can imagine my excitement, which, to be fair, seemed to be shared by all the men, and not just Bruce. Each of them wanted to see the sword, to hold it. Here was history come up from out of the ground, and they had been present for it. Although the sky was clouding over with the advance forces of a storm that had been approaching steadily from the south since sunrise, we continued the dig. Down a foot and a half from our first find, our second took almost another hour to come to light; once again, it was Bruce whose shovel uncovered it. His work had revealed part of a human body, a shoulder, the skin dark, shrunken, and leathery from having been held for who knew how long in the peat bog. The rest of us converged on Bruce's find, and I began directing the excavation. In a short time, the

shoulder was revealed to be connected to an arm and a torso, and that torso to a head and another arm and to two legs. We did our best not to handle the body, clearing out space on either side of it so that we could stoop to examine it. By now, the sky was completely dark, and our flashlights out and on. The rain was spattering, and threatening to do worse imminently. The men shining their flashlights down into the hole, I knelt to see what we had, Bruce to my left.

It was a woman, her skin dark oak in color and pulled tight around her bones by the relentless action of the bog. Her throat had been cut, that was the first thing I noticed; you could see the ragged space where a knife had been dragged across it. Neither very tall nor very big, she was wearing a short, plain, coarsely woven tunic. Her arms were bound together behind her back, and her feet were bound as well, both with leather straps that had worn well. Her face—there was something wrong with her face; even allowing for the effects of the peat bog on it, her face appeared to have been disfigured, particularly around the cheeks and eyes, where dull bone shone through, as if she had been struck by a knife, or a club or axe. Her nose was largely gone, apparently torn off. Her jaws were slightly parted; her eye sockets filled with brackish water, her braided hair woven with peat fibers.

Years after this, Bob, you sent me a collection of Seamus Heaney's poems, *North.* Your inscription said that I would enjoy the poems because Heaney, too, was doing archaeology. I didn't know he had written about the Irish bog mummies, so until I read the book, which wasn't for months, I resented what I thought was a too-glib comparison on your part. Once I opened the collection, however, and started reading, I found I couldn't stop. I read and reread those poems. There was one in particular I kept returning to, called "Strange Fruit"; I read it until I had memorized it, and then I mumbled the words in my sleep. It was a description of a girl's decapitated head, which it compared to "an exhumed gourd." Heaney wrote of the head's "leathery beauty," its "eyeholes black as pools," and his words returned me to that hole in the peat, to that woman's body lying slightly curled, seven flashlight beams wavering on it. I wasn't sure what she was doing there: she might have been a sacrifice sent to accompany an important personage on his journey into the afterlife, but in that case she should have been both better dressed and closer to the man she was to join. Her garb, her bound hands

and feet, the damage to her face, strongly hinted that she had been executed, punished for one crime or another, possibly adultery, possibly witchcraft, possibly murder. Yet if that was the case, then why had she been buried under this monument and strange sword? You wouldn't mark a criminal's grave in such a way.

Before we could investigate any further, the hole we had dug and cleared began to fill with water. It welled up quickly; from where I was crouched, I could have sworn it started from the gash in the woman's neck, pouring out of it in a thick stream. Bruce and I scrambled to escape the hole, the soldiers catching our arms and hauling us up and out. In a matter of seconds, our find was submerged in water so brackish our flashlights could distinguish nothing beneath its swirling surface. At almost the same moment, the clouds assembled overhead unleashed a deluge so fierce it left very little beyond Bruce, who was standing next to me, visible. There was no recourse: we would have to retreat to camp and wait till tomorrow to continue our work. At least, I reflected as we trudged down the hill, heads down against the rain, the water would preserve the body for us.

That night, I worked at further decoding the column's text, but found it difficult not to become distracted speculating on the sword lying on a towel beside my sleeping bag, or the woman lying underwater at the top of the hill. Bruce and I spent quite a bit longer than we should have trading suppositions, imagining explanations, and when I closed my notebook and sank down to sleep, I had accomplished much less than I had intended. With the possibility of more awaiting our discovery, however, I was less distressed over my lack of progress than I otherwise might have been. As long as the site continued to yield results, the translation could wait; if it came to that, there was no reason for me not to work on it when I returned to Aberdeen. It was a history, dating from when I was not sure, but guesstimated some time before the first millennium. It recounted a terrible plague that had afflicted the communities of all the islands, a geographic vagary that seemed to encompass at least the Shetlands, the Orkneys, the Outer Hebrides, and possibly the Inner Hebrides and parts of mainland Scotland itself. This plague was no mere ordinary sickness, but had especially malevolent associations: it had either escaped or been set loose or been sent from a place deep under Middle-Earth, a place connected to a god

or person, perhaps a sorcerer, with whom I was unfamiliar, but who was or was associated with the worm. His name was represented by a pictograph of a circle broken at about two o'clock, for which I could find no reference, however tentative. The plague's effects were reported as horrible, but left unspecified.

The next morning, the rain had passed and everything changed. Bruce shook me awake to tell me that something terrible had occurred during the night and the storm, and Collins wanted to see me. In reply to my questions, he answered that he didn't know what was the matter, but the Major seemed agitated, quite agitated. I dressed hurriedly, and found Collins standing beyond our cluster of tents, on the other side of the rise separating us from the beach, beside a pair of blue tarpaulins like the one on which we had laid the column two days before. The tarps had been weighted down at their corners with large rocks to prevent them from fluttering away from the shapes they stretched over. There was a pair of large brownish birds standing beyond the tarps that I thought I recognized as skuas. Greeting Collins, I asked him what the problem was. "There are two of my men under there," he said, jerking his thumb at the tarps. "They're dead." He made no move to pull back the tarps, nor did I request him to.

I was shocked, and said so. Aside from the fact that both men's necks had been broken, their heads wrenched almost backwards, and their eyes gouged out (although that was probably the birds, the skuas, which had found the bodies before he did), Collins didn't know what had happened. He assumed that the aggressor, his word, had ambushed the first man while he had been standing guard, then waited by his body for the second man to come to relieve him. He himself had not heard a thing, although given the storm blowing that would have been more difficult. Of course I hadn't heard anything, and told him so, which didn't seem to surprise him. Who could have done this? I asked him, and despite his reply that he hadn't the faintest idea, something in his answer, the way he gave it as if it were a scripted line he had been forced to deliver without having had sufficient time to rehearse it, made me think that he had a very good idea who was behind this. Perhaps the specifics were a little dim, but I realized that he thought we had been discovered, or I should say that he had been discovered, he and his men, by whomever they had come up here to

observe. If that were the case, then whoever had assassinated these two men was most likely still on the island, waiting for night's early fall to finish his —or their—work. When Collins told me that he was going to have to ask me to remain by my tent for a little while this morning, until his men had had a chance to scour the island, I did not protest but said of course, I understood. If this man and his orders were all that was going to be standing between me and a team of Soviet commandos, I thought it wisest not to antagonize him.

Thus, I was back at my translation much sooner than I had anticipated, while Collins sent out two two-man patrols to sweep the island, one heading east, the other west, from our camp to meet on the opposite side of the island, where they would advance together to sweep the hills before returning to camp. Throughout, they would maintain radio silence. Collins, the men, were not dressed any differently than they had been the day before; they had not changed into camouflage and berets at the first sign of trouble; but there was something different about them, and it was only after I had been seeing the hands held in the large jacket pockets, or inside the jackets to one side or the other, that I realized they were all armed, with pistols and submachine guns, and were keeping those arms close at hand, ready for use. They were more tense, but I could hardly fault them for that: I was more tense.

Bruce kept with the men, watching for the patrols' return, while I did my best to apply myself to the column's strange characters. When the patrols were not back within a couple of hours, I was not worried: even islands as small as this one could contain hidden caves, gullies, chasms, that might lengthen a search of it considerably. When the patrols had not shown by lunch, Bruce was noticeably anxious; I told him to relax, it might be hours yet. The translation was no less difficult, but I began to find the rhythm of it, so that even though large patches of it remained unclear, the broad outlines were beginning to swim into view. During this terrible plague, the peoples of the islands had sought high and low, near and far, for relief and found none. There was a considerable list of all the important people who had gone to their graves with the thing, denied the glory of a warrior's death in battle through the machinations of the one who had unleashed it. At last, the leaders of—I thought it was the Shetlands, but it could have been the

Orkneys—had decided to seek the aid of a wizard whose name I couldn't quite fix; the characters appeared to be Greek but weren't yielding any intelligible sound; who lived in the Faroe Islands and who was something of a dubious character, having dealings with all sorts of creatures—human, divine, and in-between—whom it was best to give a wide berth. Driven by their desperation, the leaders dispatched an envoy imploring his aid. Twice he refused them, but on the third request his heart softened and he agreed to assist them. He journeyed to the islands on a boat that did not touch the water, or that moved as swiftly as a bird across the water, and when he arrived he wasted no time: disclosing the supernatural origin of the plague, he told the leaders that strong measures would be needed to defeat it. He, the wizard, could summon all the sickness to himself, but he could not purge it from the earth. In order for that to be accomplished, he would require a vessel, by which, as the leaders quickly saw, he meant a human being.

By now, the sun had set, and neither patrol had appeared. I was uneasy; Bruce appeared to be barely containing a full-fledged panic attack: he ducked in and out of the tent half a dozen times in fifteen minutes, until I closed my notebook and went with him to join Collins and the others. Collins and two of the men, Joseph and Ryan, were crouched outside his tent; I presumed the other two were standing guard somewhere off in the gathering darkness. The weapons were out and on display now: each man carried a black submachine gun slung over his shoulder. They were engaged in a quiet conversation that ceased as I drew near. Squatting beside them, I asked if there had been any sign of either patrol, and was not surprised when Collins shook his head from side to side. Were we going to continue to wait for them? As of now, that was our plan. Should we perhaps think about radioing for reinforcements, that kind of thing? Collins fixed me with his sharp green eyes. "Reinforcements?" he repeated. "Why, Doctor, you make it sound as if this were some kind of military operation. My men and I are out here to assist you in your excavation and analysis of objects of priceless value to our national heritage."

"Then why those?" I asked, pointing to the guns.

"No harm in being prudent," Collins replied.

“Ah, yes, prudent,” I said. Well, if we weren’t going to call for reinforcements, since, I hastened to add, we were only an archaeological expedition and, as he had said, what possible need could archaeologists have for reinforcements? Perhaps we could shorten the length of our expedition?

That was a decision Collins would leave for the morning.

In that case, I said, would he be so kind as to provide Bruce and me with samples of the prudence—I gestured at the guns—he and his men had seen fit to exercise? Things being what they were, it seemed prudent for all of us to be prudent.

He did not think that was prudent, Collins said immediately. If Bruce and I were discovered, he did not say by whom, with any kind of weapon it would go much worse for us than if we were unarmed.

“You forget,” I said, “I have the sword.”

Collins laughed, and said if any Vikings landed on the beach he would call on me to lead the charge against them. In the meantime, he would post Ryan outside our tent, to ease our minds. Never let it be said that the British did not value their scholars, even if those scholars were American.

And then a sudden smell flooded my nostrils, a thick stench full of bog rot and rancid flesh. I coughed, fighting down the bile rushing up my throat, and Collins, Joseph, and Ryan gagged. I opened my mouth to ask what it was, and for a second the smell was in my mouth, a vile taste coating my teeth, my tongue, my throat. I thought I was going to vomit, and then, as quickly as it came, the smell was gone. I breathed deeply, and looked at Collins. I could not think what to say, and neither, apparently, could he. We stared at each other for what felt like minutes. “Well,” I said at length, “I guess I’ll turn in.”

“Good,” he said. “Do that.”

I left Collins with a request that should the patrols return I would be notified, regardless of the hour, to which he agreed. Neither my work nor my sleep was interrupted that night. Sitting cross-legged in my tent, the notebook open on my lap, reaching for this dictionary, then that dictionary, moving ahead a line only to have to move back two to reconsider the way I had rendered this word, or that, making brilliant leaps and worse-than-

obvious blunders, I tried not to think about whoever was waiting out there in the dark, whoever had seized those men's heads in his hands and twisted, swift and hard, so that their necks had snapped audibly and they had fallen down dead, their eyes food for the skuas. I tried not to wonder what he or they had done to the patrols, whether they were lying scattered over the island with their heads wrenched almost backwards, their arms and legs splayed; or had they been knifed? gloved hands clamped over their mouths, the blade drawn across their throats in a single burning stroke; or shot? a bullet spat out of a silencer into an eye, an ear. I tried not to think about any of these deaths being visited on me. I tried to decode more about the island leaders' response to the wizard's demand for a human being to serve as vessel to contain the plague. It appeared they had consented to his request with minimal debate: one man, Gunnar, a landowner of some repute, had refused to have anything to do with such dealings, but that same night the plague fell on him and by morning he was dead; his brains, the history detailed, burst and ran out his ears. After Gunnar, no one else contested the leaders' decision, and Frigga, Gunnar's eldest daughter, was selected by the leaders for the wizard's use. Elaborate preparations were made, several lengthy prayers were addressed to various gods—Odin, Loki, and Hel, goddess of death, among them—and then the wizard called all of the plague to himself, from all the islands he summoned it. It came as, or as if, a cloud of insects so vast it filled the sky, blotting out the sun. Men and women covered their heads in fear; an old woman fell dead from terror of it. The wizard commanded the plague into Frigga, who was lying bound at his feet. At first, it did not obey, nor did it heed the wizard's second command, but on his third attempt his power proved greater and the plague descended into Frigga, streaming into her mouth, her nose, her ears, the huge black cloud lodging itself within her, until the sky was once again clear, the sun shining.

This, however, was not the end. Frigga remained alive; she had become as fierce as an animal, straining against her bonds, gnashing her teeth and growling at the wizard and at the islands' leaders, threatening bloody vengeance. Nonplussed, the wizard had her rowed to the island of the—to Skua Island, where she was put ashore, her feet loosed but her hands still bound. The island was full of the skuas; there to nest, I supposed; and when Frigga, or what had been Frigga, set foot among them, they flew at her

fiercely, attacking her unprotected face and eyes with no mercy. Her screams were terrible, heard by all the peoples of all the islands. At last, the birds left her with no face and no eyes, which the wizard said was necessary so that she should go unrecognized among the dead, so that she should be unable to find her way out of the place to which he was going to dispatch her. Half a dozen strong men seized her, for even so injured she was fearfully powerful, and bore her up to the summit of one of the island's hills, where the wizard once more bound her feet and slew her by cutting her throat. The blood that spilled out was black, and one of the men it splashed died on the spot. When all the blood had left her, the wizard ordered her body buried at the summit of the opposite hill, and a stone placed over it as a reminder to all the people of all the islands of what he, (once more that name I couldn't decipher), had done for them, and as a warning not to disturb this spot, for now that the girl's body had been used as a vessel for returning (that symbol, the broken circle)'s evil to him, it would be a simple matter for him to return Frigga to her body full of his power, and if he did, she would be awful. He, the wizard, would place a sword between the stone and the girl that would keep her in her place, and he would write the warning on the stone himself, so that all could read it. Woe be to he who disturbed the sword: not only would the wrath of the one who had sent the plague fall on him, but the wrath of the wizard as well, and he would lose to the reborn girl that which she herself had lost, by which I assumed was meant his face.

It was late when I completed the preliminary translation; Bruce had long since retired to sleep. You might think I would have experienced some trepidation, some anxiety, over what I had brought to light, but you would be mistaken. Despite the hour, I was exhilarated: in a matter of days, I had rendered into reasonably intelligible English a text written in a language whose idiosyncrasies would have cost many another scholar weeks if not months of effort to overcome. Yes, there was a curse, a pair of curses, threatened against whoever disturbed the site, but such curses were commonplace; indeed, I would have been more surprised had there been no curse, no warning of dire consequences. Melodramatic films aside, when all was said and done, King Tut's curse had been nothing more than a self-fulfilling prophecy. If I was worried about anything, it was the team of

Soviet commandos creeping ever closer to us, knives clenched between their teeth, waiting for the precise moment to take revenge on us for whatever operations Collins and his men had been performing. The text on the column I judged an elaborately coded narrative, possibly intended to justify an actual event, the killing of the girl we had discovered, through recourse to supernatural explanations.

I was not particularly moved by the story I had translated. I don't think it will surprise you to hear that: you're academics; you understand the idea of professional distance. You might be interested to learn the number of people unable to maintain a similar distance. I have encountered them in my classrooms, generally in my introductory courses, and at the public lectures I have delivered, usually at the request of a museum. Perhaps you have dealt with them, too. These people find the notion of the kind of thing that happened to Frigga having occurred in their country unduly upsetting. That such actions are performed in other places, by other people, they readily accept; as long as it's foreigners, they are not troubled. Suggest, however, that, as it were, someone's hundred-times great-grandfather was a participant at a human sacrifice, and it's an affront, as if you had accused the person her or himself of having held the knife and made the cut. Some try to suggest that the people who performed these acts were foreigners, in this case, Vikings as opposed to true Scots, until I remind them that those foreigners are their ancestors, that the Vikings became Scots. By the time Frigga was slain, the two cultures were already fairly integrated. I imagine it's shame that's at the root of the sometimes surprisingly intense denials I have met with. There is no need for it: there is no culture that is innocent. In most cases, you don't have to dig particularly long or hard to unearth similar events. We are never as far from such things as we would like to think.

I unzipped the tent's flap and stepped out into the night air to stretch legs long past cramped and unbend a back in danger of remaining permanently crooked. To my relief, Ryan was still on watch. There had been, he informed me, still no sign of either patrol; come morning, he thought the Major was going to call for someone to come fetch us. He, Ryan, was sorry that I would have to abandon the dig, which I assured him he needn't be. Even the little we had accomplished was something, and there was always

the possibility of returning at a later date, during the summer, maybe, when it was warmer, and light for most of the day. If he wanted to join us, I said, I would be happy to hold a place for him. He thanked me but thought he had best decline, since come summer there was a good chance he would be quite a distance from here. And good riddance at that, he added. I laughed and said I completely understood. Stretching myself a final time, I told Ryan I would see him in the morning.

"Let's hope so, sir," he said.

Before I fell asleep, I thought again about my father, about his death. I remembered the suit we had buried him in, a cheap, worn and faded, brown polyester suit that was at least ten years out of fashion; I remembered the tie we had given the funeral home for him, a red, white, and blue adaptation of the Stars and Stripes I had given him when I was twelve for Fathers' Day and that he had continued to claim was his favorite tie; I remembered the small group of mourners at the funeral service, barely sufficient to fill the first three pews of the church. At the time, I had found all of it maddeningly pathetic; now I thought that at least my father had had a funeral. It seemed likely I was going to die out here alone and who knew what was going to be done with my body? Stripped and set out for the birds, perhaps, or my pockets stuffed with rocks and submerged, an unexpected bounty for the crabs and fish. At least there was a place with my father's name on it and the dates of his birth and death, a place to which you could drive on a Sunday with your children, as my sister sometimes did. My monument would be an island few knew and even fewer had visited.

I slept unexpectedly late, waking with the sunrise. I suppose I expected the morning to bring, if not my own death, or Bruce's, news of the deaths of others, of one or several or even all of the men during the night. That was not the case: although the four men who had left camp yesterday morning had not yet returned, and did not seem likely to, the seven of us had survived, and the chill, bright air was warm with the relief bubbling up out of us. Overhead, a skua cried out, and I took the sound for a good omen. Collins was no less relieved than the rest of us, but had decided to take no chances, radioing for the boat to return for us. We had two hours, and then we would be leaving Skua Island. No one, least of all me, was upset by this. Maybe, I thought as I hurried to my tent and stuffed my notebook, pen, and

assorted dictionaries into my duffel bag, the Soviets had not intended to liquidate the lot of us, only enough to disrupt the mission, cause Collins to pull up stakes and leave sooner than he had intended to; if that was the case, they had succeeded. Or maybe one or both of the patrols had managed to wound their assailants mortally even as they themselves were killed. A day raid was not impossible, but unlikely: obviously, whatever force had been deployed on the island was too small to storm the camp, or it would have done so already, and attacking during daylight would not improve its chances in a firefight. It did occur to me that the Soviets might be waiting for all of us to board the ship to torpedo it, but I thought that scenario unlikely: to destroy a civilian vessel in its territorial waters was to risk consequences far in excess of whatever small benefit or satisfaction our deaths might bring. Having come through the night, I felt strangely invincible, the way, I imagine, one of Beowulf's men must have felt after having lived through that awful night in Heorot.

Fueled by that sensation of invincibility, I decided I must return to the hilltop to take photographs of the column and the mummy. I had copied down the runes but I had no evidence of the object they had covered, as I had no evidence of what that object had covered. All I had was the sword, which, while intriguing, required the column and the mummy to establish its full significance. The risk of this past day, I thought, the lying in my tent waiting to die, would have been for nothing, if I couldn't bring back sufficient proof of the island's archaeological significance to ensure funding to mount a return come summer. Of course it was irrational, contradictory, but in a remarkably short space of time—the time it took to shove two pairs of socks and an extra pair of jeans into a duffel bag—I had convinced myself that if we had survived the night then we were free and clear of danger, and if we were free and clear of danger, then there was no reason not to go to the site. When I broached the subject to him, Bruce was game for running up the hill, snapping a dozen quick photographs, and running back down; as for Collins, he said that while he advised against our leaving the camp, he would not stop us from doing so. He also would not give us any of his men to accompany us, and he would not hold the ship for us if we were not back when it sailed into the bay. He appeared neither surprised nor concerned; his mind, I assume, occupied by other things. I thanked him

and returned to the tent, which Bruce, ever efficient, was in the process of flattening and rolling up. I was searching through my bag when Ryan walked up beside me and, before I realized what he was doing, slid an automatic pistol into the right pocket of my coat. “If anything happens,” he said, smiling as if he were sharing a joke or a pleasant observation, “you switch off the safety, hold it in one hand and steady with the other, and line up the front sights with the back. It’s got quite a kick to it, so be ready. If me and the lads hear anything, we’ll try to do what we can.” I nodded, and he strolled away to join the rest of his colleagues as they continued packing up the camp and loading it into the yellow inflatable rafts.

Bruce and I made the top of the hill without incident. There were a trio of skuas roosting on the column, but they flapped off as we approached. The hole was still full of black water, I saw, but once more thought it would be good for preserving our find. Bruce snapped pictures of the column lying on its blue tarp while I eased myself down into the pool beneath whose surface our mummy, our Frigga, as I had started to think of her, lay. We would raise her, which I thought could be accomplished with minimal damage, set her on the ground, photograph her, and return her to the water. The water was almost to the tops of my boots, but only almost, for which I was grateful. Balancing on my left foot, I brought the right forward, feeling for the body. I touched nothing. Apparently, she was further away from this side of the hole than I had remembered. I advanced a step, repeated the procedure, and again felt nothing. Confused, I tried a third time, and a fourth, and then I was at the other side of the hole. I turned around and ran through the process again, with no more success. The hole was empty: someone had removed Frigga. I looked up at Bruce to speak, but was stopped by a sound: the popping of firecrackers, gunfire, and brief, high cries that sounded like those of birds but were not. His face paled, and I felt the blood drain from mine. Struggling up the side of the hole, I felt in my coat pocket for the pistol and, my fingers closing around it, withdrew it as Bruce caught the top of my coat and helped me the rest of the way up. The sight of the gun startled him; he had not seen Ryan slip it to me nor had I told him. For another five, maybe ten, seconds, the distant gunfire continued, two or three submachine guns stuttering at the same time, and the cries, too, before all of it ceased. It did not start again.

Although, for reasons more of irrational panic than any real knowledge, I did not believe what I said, I told Bruce that undoubtedly we had heard Collins and the men dealing with whoever had been plaguing us. All the same, there was no harm in being careful: thus, attempting to conceal ourselves behind the scant cover afforded by slight rises of ground and solitary boulders, we descended the hill back to camp, myself in the lead with the pistol held out in front of me, Bruce following. I was filled with an almost overwhelming sense of dread, an emotion that partook equally of hanging over the toilet knowing you were going to vomit and in so doing plunge yourself into stomach-twisting illness, and of watching your father's chest sink for the final time, standing on the brink of a plunge of a very different, but no less real, kind. The camp was quiet as we sighted it, and as we drew nearer, I saw why: everyone was dead, Collins, Ryan, Joseph, the two others. Ryan was collapsed on a yellow raft, and I could not understand what was wrong with his body until I realized that his head was turned around backwards, his eye sockets empty and bloody, blood trailing from his nose, his open mouth. Collins was on the ground next to him, face down in a wide pool of blood still spreading from where his left arm had been torn from his body and tossed aside, where it lay with a pistol still clenched in its hand. I did my best not to look directly at either of them, because I was afraid that if I did I would join Bruce, who was sobbing behind me. The remaining three men lay with one of the other rafts: a glance that lasted too long showed me another of them with his neck broken, one, I think it was Joseph, with both his arms torn off, the third with a gaping red hole punched into his chest. All their eyes appeared to have been gouged out. There was blood everywhere, flecks, streaks, puddles of red splashed across the scene. From where we were standing on the hill, I could see over the rise beyond the camp to the bay and sea, both of which were empty.

"What happened?" Bruce said. "What happened to them?"

I told him I didn't know and I didn't: no team of Soviet commandos, however brutal, however ruthless, would have done this. Overhead, a small flock of skuas, a half-dozen or so, circled, crying. This, this was gratuitous, this was—I didn't know how to describe it to myself; it was outside my vocabulary.

As was what I saw next.

There, running toward us from over the rise beyond the camp, was Frigga. For a moment that stretched on elastically, I was sure my mind had broken, that the superabundant carnage spread out in front of me had snapped it with the ease with which you snap a match between your fingers. So, I thought, this is insanity, as I watched her race closer, her back hunched, her braid flapping from side to side like the tail of an animal, her sightless eyes pointed at me, her mouth open wide, her arms stretched out to either side of her, her fingers hooked. Amazing, I thought, what detail. Then Bruce saw her too and started screaming, which was all it took for me to know I was not insane, and even as I knew this I felt a tremendous regret, because I was not sure my mind could support Frigga running across the ground and everything that implied, and I felt a tremendous fear, my gut squeezing. I leveled the pistol, aligning the sights on Frigga's chest, and squeezed the trigger. The gun roared, almost kicking itself from my hands, but I held on to it and fired again, and again, and again. I could see the fabric of her tunic pucker where the bullets struck with what at this distance should have been sufficient force to knock a big man sprawling with several large holes in him. I fired again before she was on me, striking me on the side of the head with a kindling-thin arm that connected like a heavy club in the hands of a weightlifter, sweeping me from my feet and sending me rolling down the hill. Everything spun around, and around, and around, then I hit the bundle that was my duffel bag.

On the hillside above, Bruce was screaming. Pushing myself up on my hands, I saw him on his back, Frigga straddling him, one hand at his throat, the other approaching his jaw. My God, I thought, the warning was true: she's going to take his face. She did not care that Bruce had had nothing to do with what had happened to her so long ago: she had suffered, and now someone else could suffer. The pistol had fallen from my grip, but was close; I picked it up, aimed it, and emptied the rest of the clip into Frigga's back. It did not affect her in the least. As Bruce struggled to free her hand from his throat, she dug the thumb of her other hand into his skin and began drawing it along his jaw, blood squirting out as she split his flesh. His screams increased. Enraged, I threw the useless pistol at her. It struck her head and fell to the side, without her noticing. Frantically, I looked about for a weapon, for something that might be of use against her, as her thumb

continued its circuit of Bruce's face and his screams continued. Guns were useless, and I doubted explosives—the sword! It had kept her in place for a thousand years: it might be effective. Bruce had rolled it up inside the tent to protect it. The tent was behind my duffel bag; I dropped to my knees and began furiously untying the tent's straps. Bruce's screams continued. I fought with a knot, tore the strap off. I undid the remaining strap, unrolled the tent, shouting for Bruce to hold on. His screams continued. I did not look up. Two pairs of socks, a sweater, where was the sword? There! Swaddled in a blanket I yanked away. There was a tearing sound, like a shirt caught on a nail, and Bruce's screams became a wet, choked gurgle. I looked up, the sword in my hand, and saw that I was too late: Frigga had taken Bruce's face, peeled it off him the way you might peel an orange, and draped it over her own ruined face. His face gone, his throat split open by her thumb, Bruce was dead. Through the ragged holes in Bruce's face, Frigga's empty sockets gazed at me, and my mind trembled at the sight. In a bound, she had leapt off him, and was running toward me.

I fled. Sword in hand, I ran as fast as I could for the beach, praying that the boat would have made its appearance, that it would be sitting there in the bay and I would be able to swim out to it, leave Frigga behind. Even as the beach came into view, though, and I ran down on to it, slipping and almost falling on a loose rock, and I saw the bay, the sea beyond, and, yes, the ship approaching in the not-too-distant distance, I could hear Frigga's feet clattering across the rocks behind me, feel her hand reaching out to catch my jacket. She was too fast; she was on me: I was going to die here, on the beach, in sight of the ship and salvation; if I were lucky, she would break my neck and be done with me quickly. A tidal wave of rage swelled in my chest, rushing up into my brain, swamping my fear. I was going to die here, on this Godforsaken island, at the hands of a monster I had brought up out of the ground, and no one would know, no one would know any of this, anything. I caught the sword in both hands, stopped, pivoted, and swung it as hard as I could, screaming my throat raw with fury and frustration.

Frigga could not stop in time to avoid me. The blade caught her on the side of the head, cracking it, sending poor Bruce's empty face flying off her. She staggered, and I struck again, bringing the sword down on her right collarbone, breaking it and three of the ribs beneath it, ripping open her

leathery skin. She swept at me with her left hand, catching me a glancing blow on the right shoulder that spun me half around; I struck her right arm and heard a bone snap. We were at the water; a wave swept around my boots. I backed into it, Frigga following, her dark face streaked with Bruce's blood. The freezing water rising to my knees, my thighs, I continued back, holding the sword before me. Frigga feinted to the right, then lunged at me, and with a scream I drove the sword straight through her, just under the breastbone, all the way in and out the other side, to the hilt. It pushed through her with the sound of leather tearing. I kept screaming as she stumbled and fell in the water with a splash; I kept screaming as she tried to stand and could not, flailing at the sword impaling her; I kept screaming as I pulled off my coat, tugged off my boots, and swam for the boat. I screamed as if screaming would defeat her. I did not see Frigga sink under the water, a crowd of skuas descending on to it as she did, flapping and crying: that was what the ship captain claimed to have seen. I was still screaming when they pulled me out of the water on to the ship, and when at last I stopped screaming, all I would say, for a week, in reply to whatever question was posed to me, was, "They're dead. They're all dead. She got them. Frigga got them."

Of course, that isn't enough for you. Of course, you want to hear more; you want to know what happened next. It's all right: I would, too. I was put in a hospital, in Edinburgh, in a private room. I saw various doctors, took various medications, and had many interviews with many men, some of them in uniform, some in suits. I told them all the same story I told you. I presume there was an investigation, even several, although apparently Frigga was not found; that was what I was told, at least. No charges of any kind were brought against me; why they would have been, I'm not sure, except that when things go wrong to this magnitude and this many people die, a scapegoat is usually required. I have no idea what explanation was provided Bruce's family, whether his body was returned to them and if so in what state. In the hospital, I tried to compose a letter expressing my sympathy at their loss, but I could not write anything that did not sound too much like a lie, so in the end I sent a generic card that a nurse bought for me. I presume the deaths of Collins, Ryan, Joseph, and the others were assigned an unrelated tragic cause: lost at sea during training maneuvers;

killed when their helicopter went down. Eventually, I was released from the hospital, with a generous supply of pills to keep me from waking in the night, screaming. I taught at Aberdeen the following semester, actually delivering my own lectures and running my own tutorials, but I returned home before the last semester, leaving the department in the lurch and not caring that I did. They have not invited me back; I've had no desire to return. My career since then—has been less than it could have been. I—I think I've psychoanalyzed myself sufficiently for one night. I'll leave the reasons for my failure to achieve, whether they be guilt, fear, heredity, a combination of the lot, or none of the above, to your discussion.

I tend to avoid the sea. Had I realized how close this house is to the Atlantic, I most likely would not have come. You told me, Bob, I simply wasn't paying attention. Beside the sound and smell of the ocean, I try to stay busy; when my mind is free, I wonder: Was that final blow sufficient to kill Frigga? Can you even speak of such a thing, is it possible? The birds, the skuas, what were they doing there? Did the deaths of Collins and the men, Bruce's death, satisfy her, or, even now, as we sit here talking, is she making her way toward me? Nights like this, if I'm unwise or unlucky enough to find myself by the sea, I imagine—well, I'm sure you can guess.

Mr. Gaunt

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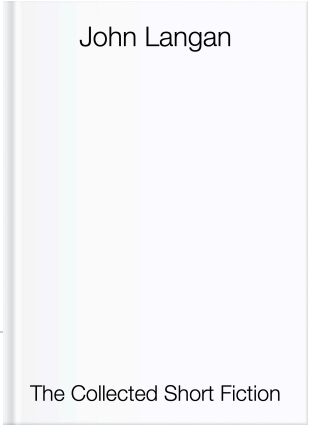

1

It was not until five weeks after his father's funeral that Henry Farange was able to remove the white plastic milk crate containing the old man's final effects from the garage. His reticence was a surprise: his father had been sick—dying, really—for the better part of two years and Henry had known it, had known of the enlarged heart, the failing kidneys, the brain jolted by mini-strokes. He had known it was, in the nursing home doctor's favorite cliché, only a matter of time, and if there were moments Henry could not believe the old man had held on for as long or as well as he had, that didn't mean he expected his father to walk out of the institution to which his steadily-declining health had consigned him. For all that, the inevitable phone call, the one telling him that his father had suffered what appeared to be a heart attack, caught him off-guard, and when his father's nurse had approached him at the gravesite, her short arms cradling the milk crate into which the few items the old man had taken with him to the nursing home had been deposited, Henry's chest had tightened, his eyes filled with burning tears. Upon his return home from the post-funeral brunch, he had removed the crate from his backseat and carried it into the garage, where he set it atop his workbench, telling himself he couldn't face what it contained today, but would see to it tomorrow.

Tomorrow, though, turned into the day after tomorrow, which became the day after that, and then the following day, and so on, until a two week period passed during which Henry didn't think of the white plastic milk crate at all, and was only reminded of it when a broken cabinet hinge necessitated his sliding up the garage door. The sight of the milk crate was a reproach, and in a sudden burst of repentance he rushed up to it, hauled it

off the workbench, and ran into the house with it as if it were a pot of boiling water and he without gloves. He half-dropped it onto the kitchen table and stood over it, panting. Now that he let his gaze wander over the crate's contents, he could see that it was not as full as he had feared. A dozen hardcover books: his father's favorite Henry James novels, which, he had claimed, were all that he wanted to read in his remaining time. Henry lifted them from the crate one by one, glancing at their titles. *The Ambassadors*. *The Wings of the Dove*. *The Golden Bowl*. *The Turn of the Screw*. *What Maisie Knew*. He recognized that last one: the old man had tried twice to convince him to read it, sending him a copy when he was at college, and again a couple of years ago, a month or two before he entered the nursing home. It was his father's favorite book of his favorite writer, and, although he was no English scholar, Henry had done his best, both times, to read it. But he rapidly became lost in the labyrinth of the book's prose, in sentences that wound on for what felt like days, so that by the time you arrived at the end, you had forgotten the beginning and had to start over again. He hadn't finished *What Maisie Knew*, had given up the attempt after chapter one the first time, chapter three the second, and had had to admit his failures to his father. He had blamed his failures on other obligations, on school and work, promising he would give the book another try when he was less busy. He might make good his promise yet: there might be a third attempt, possibly even success, but when he was done, his father would not be waiting to discuss it with him. Henry removed the rest of the books from the crate rapidly.

Here was a framed photo of him receiving his MBA, a smaller black and white picture of a man and woman he recognized as his grandparents tucked into its lower right corner. Here was a gray cardboard shoebox filled with assorted snapshots that appeared to stretch back over his father's lifetime, as well as four old letters folded in their original envelopes. Here was a postcard showing the view up the High Street to Edinburgh Castle. Here was the undersized saltire, the blue and white flag of Scotland, he had bought for his father when he had stopped off for a weekend in Edinburgh on his way home from Frankfurt, just last summer. Here was a cassette tape wrapped in a piece of ruled notebook paper bound to it by a thick rubber band, his name written on the paper in his father's rolling hand.

His heart leapt, and Henry slid the rubber band from the around the paper with fingers suddenly dumb. There was more writing on the other side of the paper, a brief note. He read, “Dear Son, I’m making this tape *just in case*. Listen to it *as soon as possible*. It’s all true. Love, Dad.” That was all. He turned the tape over: it was plain and black, no label on either side. Leaving the note on the table, he carried the tape into the living room, to the stereo. He slid the tape into the deck, pushed PLAY, adjusted the volume, and stood back, arms crossed.

For a moment, there was only the hum of blank tape, then a loud snap and clatter and the sound of his father’s voice, low, resonant, and slightly graveled, the way it sounded when he was tired. His father said, “I think I have this thing working. Yes, that’s it.” He cleared his throat. “Hello, Henry, it’s your father. If you’re listening to this, then I’m gone. I realize this may seem strange, but there are facts of which you need to be aware, and I’m concerned I don’t have much time to tell you them. I’ve tried to write it all down for you, but my hand’s shaking so badly I can’t make any progress. To tell the truth, I don’t know if the matter’s sufficiently clear in my head for me to write it. So, I’ve borrowed this machine from the night-duty nurse. I suppose I should have told you all this—oh, years ago, but I didn’t, because—well, let’s get to what I have to say first. I can fill in my motivations along the way. I hope you have the time to listen to this all at once, because I don’t think it’ll make much sense in bits and pieces. I’m not sure it makes much sense all together.

“The other night, I saw your uncle on television: not David, your mother’s brother, but George, my brother. I’m sure you won’t remember him: the last and only time you saw him, you were four. I saw him, and I saw his butler. You know how little I sleep these days, no matter, it seems, how tired I am. Much of the time between sunset and sunrise I pass reading—re-reading James, and watching more television than I should. Last night, unable to concentrate on *What Maisie Knew* any longer, I found myself watching a documentary about Edinburgh on public television. If I watch PBS, I can convince myself I’m being mildly virtuous, and I was eager to see one of my favorite cities, if only on the screen. It’s the city my parents came from; I know you know that. Sadly, the documentary was a failure, so spectacularly insipid that it almost succeeded in delivering me to sleep a

good three hours ahead of schedule. Then I saw George walk across the screen. The shot was of Prince's Street during the Edinburgh festival. The street was crowded, but I recognized my brother. He was slightly stooped, his hair and beard bone-white, though his step was still lively. He was followed by his butler, who stood as tall and unbending as ever. Just as he was about to walk off the screen, George stopped, turned his head to the camera, and winked, slowly and deliberately.

"From the edge of sleep, I was wide awake, filled with such fear my shaking hands fumbled the remote control onto the floor. I couldn't muster the courage to retrieve it, and it lay there until the morning nurse picked it up. I didn't sleep: I couldn't. Your uncle kept walking across that screen, his butler close behind. Though I hadn't heard the news of his death, I had assumed he must be gone by now. More than assumed: I had hoped it. I should have guessed, however, that George would not have slipped so gently into that good night; indeed, although he's just this side of ninety, I now suspect he'll be around for quite some time to come.

"Seeing him—does it sound too mad to say that I half-think he saw me? More than half-think: I know he saw me. Seeing my not-dead older brother walk across the screen, to say nothing of his butler, I became obsessed with the thought of you. Your uncle may try to contact you, especially once I'm gone, which I have the most unreasonable premonition may be sooner rather than later. Before he does, you must know about him. You must know who, and what, he is. You must know his history, and you must know about his butler, about that… monster. For reasons you'll understand later, I can't simply tell you what I have to tell you, or perhaps I should say I can't tell you what I have to tell you simply. If I were to come right out with it in two sentences, you wouldn't believe me; you'd think I had suffered one TIA too many. I can't warn you to stay away from your uncle and leave it at that: I know you, and I know the effect such prohibitions have on you; I've no desire to arouse your famous curiosity. So I'm going to ask you to bear with me, to let me tell you about my brother I what I think is the manner best-suited to it. Indulge me, Henry, indulge your old father."

Henry paused the tape. He walked out of the living room back into the kitchen, where he rummaged the refrigerator for a beer while his father's words echoed in his ears. The old man knew him, all right: his "famous"

curiosity was aroused, enough that he would sit down and listen to the rest of the tape now, in one sitting. His dinner date was not for another hour and a half, and, even if he were a few minutes late, that wouldn't be a problem. He smiled, thinking that despite his father's protestations of fear, once the old man warmed up to talking, you could hear the James scholar taking over, his words, his phrasing, his sentences, bearing subtle witness to a lifetime spent with the writer he had called "the Master." Henry pried the cap off the beer, checked to be sure answering machine was on, switched the phone's ringer off, and returned to the living room, where he released the PAUSE button and settled himself on the couch.

His father's voice returned.

2

Once upon a time, there was a boy who lived with his father and his father's butler in a very large house. As the boy's father was frequently away, and often for long periods of time, he was left alone in the large house with the butler, whose name was Mr. Gaunt. While he was away, the boy's father allowed him to roam through every room in the house except one. He could run through the kitchen; he could bounce on his father's bed; he could leap from the tall chairs in the living room. But he must never, ever, under any circumstances, go into his father's study. His father was most insistent on this point. If the boy entered the study… his father refused to say what would happen, but the tone of his voice and the look on his face hinted that it would be something terrible.

That was how the story used to begin, as if it were a fairy tale that someone else had written and I just happened to remember. I suppose it sounds generic enough: the traditional, almost incantatory, beginning; the nondescript boy, father, butler, and house. Do you remember the first time I told it to you? I don't imagine so: you were five, although you were precocious, which was what necessitated the tale in the first place. You were staying with me for the summer—your mother and her second husband were in Greece—in the house in Highland. That house! all those rooms, the high ceilings, the porch with its view of the Hudson: how I wish you didn't have to sell it to afford the cost of putting me in this place. I had hoped you

might choose to live there. Ah well, as you yourself said, what use is a house of that size to you, with no wife or family? Another regret…

But I was talking about the story, and the first time you heard it. Like some second-rate Bluebeard, I had permitted you free access to every room in the house save one: my study, which contained not the head of my previous wife (if only! sorry, I know she's your mother), but extensive notes, four years' worth of notes towards the book I was about to write on Henry James's portrayal of family relations. Yes, yes, I should have known that declaring it forbidden would only pique your interest; it's one of those mistakes you not only can't believe you made, but that seems so fundamentally obvious you doubt whether in fact it occurred. The room was kept locked when I wasn't working in it, and I believed it secure. All this time later, I have yet to discover how you broke into it. I can see you sitting in the middle of the hardwood floor, four years' work scattered and shredded around you, a look of the most intense concentration upon your face as you dragged a pen across my first edition of *The Wings of the Dove*. I'm not sure how, but I remained calm, if not quite cheerful, as I escorted you from my study up the stairs to your bedroom. I sat you on the bed and told you I had a story for you. You were very excited: you loved it when I told you stories. Was it another one about Hercules? No, it wasn't; it was another kind of story. It was the story of a little boy just about your age, a little boy who had opened a door he was not supposed to.

Then and there, my brain racing, I told you the story of Mr. Gaunt and his terrible secret, speaking slowly, deliberately, so that I would have time to shape the next event. Does it surprise you to hear that the story has no written antecedent? It became such a part of our lives after that. It frightened you out of my study for the rest of that summer; you avoided that entire side of the house. Then the next summer, when your friend Brad came to stay for the weekend and the three of us stayed up late while I told you stories, you actually requested it. "Tell about Mr. Gaunt," you said. I can't tell you how shocked I was. I was shocked that you remembered: children forget much, and it's difficult to predict what will lodge in their minds; plus you had been with your mother and husband number two without interruption for almost nine months. I was shocked, too, that you would want to hear a narrative expressly crafted to frighten you. It

frightened poor Brad; we had to leave the light on for him, which you treated with a bit more contempt than really was fair.

After that: how many times did I tell you that story? Several that same summer, and several every summer for the next six or seven years. Even when you were a teenager, and grew your hair long and refused to remove that denim jacket that you wore down to an indistinct shade of pale, even then you requested the story, albeit with less frequency. It's never gone that far from us, has it? At dinner, the visit before last, we talked about it. Strange that in all this time you never asked me how I came by it, in what volume I first read it. Perhaps you're used to my having an esoteric source for everything and assume this to be the case here. Or perhaps you don't want to know: you find it adds to the story not to know its origin. Or perhaps you're just not interested: literary scholarship never has been your strong point. That's not a reproach: investment banking has been very good for and to you, and you know how proud I am of you.

There is more to the story, though: there is more to every story. You can always work your way down, peel back the layers 'til you discover, as it were, the skull beneath the skin. Whatever you thought about the story's roots, whatever you would answer if I were to ask you where you thought I had plucked it from, I'm sure you never guessed that it grew out of an event that occurred in our family. That *donnée*, as James would've called it, involved George, George and his butler and Peter, George's son and your cousin. Yes, you haven't heard of Peter before: I haven't ever mentioned his name to you. He's been dead a long time now.

You met George when you were four, at the house in Highland. I had just moved into it from the apartment in Huguenot I occupied after your mother and I separated. George was in Manhattan for a couple of days, doing research at one of the museums, and took the train up to spend the afternoon with us. He was short, stocky verging on portly, and he kept his beard trimmed in a Vandyke, which combined with his deep-set eyes and sharp nose leant him rather a Satanic appearance: the effect, I'm sure, intended. He wore a vest and a pocket watch with which you were fascinated, not having seen a pocket watch before. Throughout the afternoon and into the evening, you kept asking George what time it was. He responded to each question by slowly withdrawing the watch from his pocket by its chain,

popping open its cover, carefully scrutinizing its face, and announcing, “Why, Hank,” (he insisted on calling you Hank; he appeared to find it most amusing), “it’s three o’clock.” He was patient with you; I will grant him that.

After I put you to bed, he and I sat on the back porch looking at the Hudson, drinking Scotch, and talking, the end result of which was that he made a confession—confession! it was more of a boast!—and I demanded he leave the house, leave it then and there and never return, never speak to me or communicate in any way with me again. He didn’t believe I was serious, but he went. I’ve no idea how or if he made his train. I haven’t heard from him since, all these years, nor have I have heard of him, until last night.

But this is all out of order. You don’t know anything about your uncle. I’ve been careful not to mention his name lest I arouse that curiosity of yours. Indeed, maybe I shouldn’t be doing so now. That’s assuming, of course, that you’ll take any of the story I’m going to relate seriously, that you won’t think I’ve confused my Henry James with M.R. James, or, worse, think it a sign of mental or emotional decay, the first hint of senility or depression. The more I insist on the truth of what I tell, the more shrill and empty my voice will sound; I know the scenario well. I risk, then, a story that might be taken as little more than a prolonged symptom of mental impairment or illness; though really, how interesting is that? In any event, it’s not as if I have to worry about you putting me in a home. Yes, I know you had no choice. Let’s start with the background, the condensed information the author delivers, after an interesting opening, in one or two well-written chapters.

George was ten years older than I, the child of what in those days was considered our parents’ middle age, as I was the child of their old age. This is to say that Mother was thirty-five when George was born, and forty-five when I was. Father was close to fifty at my birth, about the same age I was when you were born. Funny—as a boy and a young man, I used to swear that, if I was to have children, I would not wait until I was old enough to be their grandfather, and despite those vows that was exactly what I did. Do you suppose that’s why you haven’t married yet? We like to think we’re masters of our own fates, but the fact is, our parents’ examples exert far

more influence on us than we realize or are prepared to realize. I like to think I was a much more youthful father to you than my father was to me, but in all fairness, fifty was a different age for me than it was for him. For me, fifty was the age of my maturity, a time of ripeness, a balance point between youth and old age; for Father, fifty was a room with an unsettlingly clear view of the grave. He died when I was fifteen, you know, while here I am, thanks to a daily assortment of colored pills closer to eighty than anyone in my family before me, with the exception, of course, of my brother.

I have few childhood memories of George: an unusually intelligent student, he left the house and the country for Oxford at the age of fifteen. Particularly gifted in foreign languages, he achieved minor fame for his translation and commentary on *Les mystères du ver*, a fifteenth century French translation of a much older Latin work. England suited him well; he returned to see us in Poughkeepsie infrequently. He did, however, visit our parents' brothers and sisters, our uncles and aunts, in and around Edinburgh on holidays, which appeared to mollify Father and Mother. (Their trips back to Scotland were fewer than George's trips back to them.) My brother also voyaged to the Continent: France, first, which irritated Father (he was possessed by an almost pathological hatred of all things French, whose cause I never could discover, since our name is French; you can be sure, he would not have read my book on Flaubert); then Italy, which worried Mother (she was afraid the Catholics would have him); then beyond, on to those countries that for the greater part of my life were known as Yugoslavia: Croatia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Serbia, and past them to the nations bordering the Black Sea. He made this trip and others like it, to Finland, to Turkey, to Persia as it was then called, often enough. I have no idea how he afforded any of it. Our parents sent him little enough money, and his scholarship was no source of wealth. I have no idea, either, of the purpose of these trips; when I asked him, George answered, "Research," and said no more. He wrote once a month, never more and occasionally less, short letters in which a single nugget of information was buried beneath layers of formality and pleasantry; not like those letters I wrote to you while you were at Harvard. It was in such a letter that he told us he was engaged to be married.

Aside from the fact that it lasted barely two years, the most remarkable thing about your uncle's marriage was your cousin, Peter, who was born seven months after it. Mother's face wore a suspicious frown for several days after the news of his birth reached us (I think it came by telegram; your grandparents were very late installing a phone); Father was too excited by the birth of his first grandson to care. I didn't feel much except a kind of disinterested curiosity. I was an uncle, but I was thirteen, so the role didn't have the significance for me it might have had I been only a few years older. The chances of my seeing my nephew any time in the near future were sufficiently slim to justify my reserve; as it happened, however, my brother and his wife, whose name was Clarissa, visited us the following summer with Peter. Clarissa was quite wealthy; she was also, I believe, quite a bit older than George, though by how much I couldn't say. Even now, after a lifetime's practice, I'm not much good at deciphering people's ages, which causes me no end of trouble, I can assure you. Their visit went smoothly enough, though your grandparents showed, I noticed, the razor edge of uneasiness with their new daughter-in-law's crisp accent and equally crisp manners. Your grandmother used her wedding china every night, while your grandfather, whose speech usually was peppered with Scots words and expressions, spoke what my mother used to call "the King's English." Their working class origins, I suspect, rising up to haunt them.

Peter was fat and blond, a pleasant child who appeared to enjoy his place on your grandmother's hip, which from the moment he arrived was where he spent most of his days. Any reservations Mother might have had concerning the circumstances of his birth were wiped away at the sight of him. When he returned from work, Father had a privileged place for his grandson on his knee: holding each of the baby's hands in his hands, Father sat Peter upright on his knee, then jiggled his leg up and down, bouncing Peter as if he were riding a horse, all the while singing a string of nonsense syllables: "a leedle lidel leedle lidel leedle lidel lum." It was something Father did with any baby who entered the house; he must have done it with me, and with George. I tried it with you, but you were less than amused by it. After what appeared to be some initial doubt at his grandfather's behavior, when he rode up and down with an almost tragic expression on

his face, Peter quickly came to enjoy and even anticipate it, and when he saw his grandfather walk in the door, the baby's face would break into an enormous grin, and he waved his arms furiously. Clarissa was good with her son, handling him with more confidence than you might expect from a new mother; George largely ignored Peter, passing him to Clarissa, Mother, Father, or me whenever he could manage it. Much of his days George spent sequestered in his room, working, he said, on a new translation. Of what he did not specify, only that the book was very old, much older than *Les Mystères du Ver*. He kept the door to the room locked, which I discovered, of course, trying to open it.

The three of them stayed a month, leaving with promises to write on both sides, and although it was more than a year later, it seemed the next thing anyone heard or knew Clarissa had filed for divorce. Your grandparents were stunned. They refused to tell me the grounds for Clarissa's action, but when I lay awake at night I heard them discussing it downstairs in the living room, their voices faint and indistinguishable except when one or the other of them became agitated and shouted, "It isn't true, for God's sake, it can't be true! We didn't raise him like that!" Clarissa sued for custody of Peter, and somewhat to our parents' surprise, I think, George counter-sued. It was not only that he did not appear possessed of sufficient funds; he did not appear possessed of sufficient interest. The litigation was interminable and bitter. Your grandfather died before it was through, struck dead in the street as we were walking back from Sunday services by a stroke whose cause, I was and am sure, was his elder son's divorce. George did not return for the funeral; he phoned to say it was absolutely impossible for him to attend—the case and all—he was sure Father would have understood. The divorce and custody battle were not settled for another year after that. When they were, George was triumphant.

I don't know if you remember the opening lines of *What Maisie Knew*. The book begins with a particularly messy divorce and custody fight, in which the father, though "bespattered from head to foot," initially succeeds. The reason, James tells us, is "not so much that the mother's character had been more absolutely damaged as that the brilliancy of a lady's complexion (and this lady's, in court, was immensely remarked) might be more regarded as showing the spots." I can recall reading those lines for the first time: I was a

senior in high school, and a jolt of recognition shot up my spine as I recognized George and Clarissa, whose final blows against one another had been struck the previous fall. I think that's when I first had an inclination I might study old James. Unlike James's novel, in which the custody of Maisie is eventually divided between her parents, George won full possession of Peter, which he refused to share in the slightest way with Clarissa. I imagine she must have been devastated. George packed his and Peter's bags and moved north, to Edinburgh, where he purchased a large house on the High Street and engaged the services of a manservant, Mr. Gaunt.

Oh yes, Mr. Gaunt was an actual person. Are you surprised to hear that? I suppose he did seem rather a fantastic creation, didn't he? I can't think of him with anything less than complete revulsion, revulsion and fear, more fear than I wish I felt. I met him when I was in Edinburgh doing research on Stevenson and called on my brother, who had returned from the Shetlands that morning and was preparing to leave for Belgium later that same night. The butler was exactly as I described him to you in the story, only more so.

Mr. Gaunt never said a word. He was very tall, and very thin, and his skin was very white and very tight, as if he were wearing a suit that was too small. He had a long face and long, lank, thin, colorless hair, and a big, thick jaw, and tiny eyes that peered out at you from the deep caverns under his brows. He did not smile, but kept his mouth in a perpetual pucker. He wore a black coat with tails, a gray vest and gray pants, and a white shirt with a gray cravat. He was most quiet, and if you were standing in the kitchen or the living room and did not hear anything behind you, you could expect to turn around and find Mr. Gaunt standing there.

Mr. Gaunt served the meals, though he himself never ate that the boy saw, and escorted visitors to and from the boy's father when the boy's father was home, and, on nights when he was not home, Mr. Gaunt unlocked the door of the forbidden study at precisely nine o'clock and went into it, closing the door behind him. He remained there for an hour. The boy did not know what the butler did in that room, nor was he all that interested in finding out, but he was desperate for a look at his father's study.

Your uncle claimed to have contracted Gaunt's service during one of his many trips, and explained that the reason Gaunt never spoke was a thick

accent—I believe George said it was Belgian—that marred his speech and caused him excruciating embarrassment. As Gaunt served us tea and shortbread, I remember thinking that something about him suggested greed, deep and profound: his hands, whose movements were precise yet eager; his eyes, which remained fixed on the food, and us; his back, which was slightly bent, inclining him towards us but having the opposite effect, making him seem as if he were straining upright, resisting a powerful downward pull. No doubt it was the combination of these things. Whatever the source, I was noticeably glad to see him exit the room; although, after he had left, I had the distinct impression he was listening at the door, hunched down, still greedy.

As you must have guessed, the boy in our fairy tale was Peter, your cousin. He was fourteen when he had his run in with Mr. Gaunt, older, perhaps, than you had imagined him; the children in fairy tales are always young children, aren't they? I should also say more about the large house in which he lived. It was a seventeenth century mansion located on the High Street in Edinburgh, across the street and a few doors down from St. Giles's Cathedral. Its inhabitants had included John Jackson, a rather notorious character from the early nineteenth century. There's a mention of him in James's notebooks: he heard Jackson's story while out to dinner in Poughkeepsie, believe it or not, and considered treating it in a story before rejecting it as, "too lurid, too absolutely over the top." The popular legend, of whose origins I'm unsure, is that Jackson, a defrocked Anglican priest, had truck with infernal powers. Robed and hooded men were seen exiting his house who had not been seen entering it. Lights glowed in windows, strange cries and laughter sounded, late at night. A woman who claimed to have worked as Jackson's chambermaid swore there was a door to Hell in a room deep under the basement. He was suspected in the vanishings of several local children, but nothing was proved against him. He died mysteriously, found, as I recall, at the foot of a flight of stairs, apparently having tumbled down them. His ghost, its neck still broken, was sighted walking in front of the house, looking over at St. Giles and grinning; about what, I've never heard.

Most of this information about the house I had from George during my visit; it was one of the few subjects about which I ever saw him enthused. I

don’t know how much if any of it your cousin knew; though I suspect his father would have told him all. Despite the picture its history conjures, the house was actually quite pleasant: five stories high including the attic, full of surprisingly large and well-lit rooms, decorated with a taste I wouldn’t have believed George possessed. There was indeed a locked study: it composed the entirety of the attic. I saw the great dark oaken door to it when your uncle took me on a tour of the house: we walked up the flight of stairs to the attic landing and there was the entrance to the study. George did not open it. I asked him if this was where he kept the bodies, and although he cheerfully replied that no, no, that was what the cellar was for, his eyes registered a momentary flash of something that was panic or annoyance. I did not ask him to open the door, in which there was a keyhole of sufficient diameter to afford a good look into the room beyond. Had my visit been longer, had I been his guest overnight, I might have stolen back up to that landing to peek at whatever it was my brother did not wish me to see. Curiosity, it would appear, does not just run in our family: it gallops.

Peter lived in this place, his father’s locked secret above him, his only visitors his tutors, his only companion the silent butler. That’s a bit much, isn’t it? During our final conversation, George told me that Peter had been a friendless boy, but I doubt he knew his son well enough to render such a verdict with either accuracy or authority. Peter didn’t know many, if any, other children, but I like to think of your cousin having friends in the various little shops that line the High Street. You know where I’m talking about, the cobbled street that runs in a straight line up to the Castle. You remember those little shops with their flimsy T-shirts, their campy postcards, their overpriced souvenirs. We bought the replica of the Castle that used to sit on the mantelpiece at one of them, along with a rather expensive pin for that girl you were involved with at the time. (What was her name? Jane?) I like to think of Peter, out for a walk, stopping in several shops along the way, chatting with the old men and women behind the counter when business was slow. He was a fine conversationalist for his age, your cousin.

I had met him again, you see, when he was thirteen, the year before the events I’m relating occurred. George was going to be away for the entire summer, so Peter came on his own to stay with your grandmother. I was

living in Manhattan—actually, I was living in a cheap apartment across the river in New Jersey and taking the ferry to Manhattan each morning. My days I split teaching and writing my dissertation, which was on the then-relatively-fresh topic of James's later novels, particularly *The Golden Bowl*, and their modes of narration. Every other week, more often when I could manage it, I took the train up to your grandmother's to spend the day and have dinner with her. This was not as great a kindness as I would like it to seem: my social life was non-existent, and I was desperately lonely. Thus, I visited Peter several times throughout June, July, and August.

At our first meeting he was unsure what to make of me, spending most of the meal silently staring down at his plate, and asking to be excused as soon as he had finished his dessert. Over subsequent visits, however, our relationship progressed. By our last dinner he was speaking with me freely, shaking my hand vigorously when it was time for me to leave for my bus and telling me that he had greatly enjoyed making my acquaintance. What did he look like? Funny: I don't think I have a picture of him; not from that visit, anyway. He wasn't especially tall; if he was due an adolescent growth-spurt, it had yet to arrive. His hair, while not the same gold color it had been when he was a baby, still was blond, slightly curled, and his eyes were dark brown. His face, well, as is true with all children, his face blended both his parents', although in his case the blend was particularly fine. What I mean is, unlike you, whose eyes and forehead have always been identifiably mine and whose nose and chin have always been identifiably your mother's, Peter's face, depending on the angle and lighting, appeared to be either all his father or all his mother. Even looking at him directly, you could see both faces simultaneously. He spoke with an Edinburgh accent, crisp and clear, and when he was excited or enthusiastic about a subject, his words would stretch out: "That's maaaarvelous." He told your grandmother her accent hadn't slipped in the least, and she smiled for the rest of the day.

He was extremely bright, and extremely interested in ancient Egypt, about which his father had provided him with several surprisingly good books. He could not decide whether to be a philologist, like his father, or an Egyptologist, which sounded more interesting; he inclined to Egyptology, but thought his father would appreciate him following his path. Surprising and heartbreaking—horrifying—as it seems in retrospect, Peter loved and

missed his father. He was very proud of George: he knew of and appreciated George's translations, and confided in us his hope that one day he might achieve something comparable. "My father's a genius," I can hear him saying, almost defiantly. We were sitting at your grandmother's dining room table. I can't remember how we had arrived at the subject of George, but he went on, "Aye, a genius. None of his teachers were ever as smart as him. None of them could make head nor tail of *Les Mystères du Ver*, and my father translated the whole thing, on his own. There was this one teacher who thought he was something, and he was pretty smart, but my father was smarter; he showed him."

"Of course he's smart, dear," your grandmother said. "He's a Farange. Just like you and your uncle."

"And your Granny," I said.

"Oh, go on, you," she said.

"He's translated things that no one's even heard of," Peter went on. "He's translated pre-dynastic Egyptian writing. That's from before the pyramids, even. That's fifty-five centuries ago. Most folk don't even know it exists."

"Has he let you see any of it?" I asked.

"No," Peter said glumly. "He says I'm not ready yet. I have to master Latin and Greek before I can move on to just hieroglyphics."

"I'm sure you will," your grandmother said, and we moved on to some other topic. Later, after Peter was asleep, she said to me, "He's a lovely boy, our Peter, a lovely boy. So polite and well-mannered. But he seems awfully lonely to me. Always with his nose in a book: I don't think his father spends nearly enough time with him."

Peter did not speak of his mother.

He knew ancient Egypt as if he had lived in it: your grandmother and I spent more than one dinner listening to your cousin narrate such events as the building of the Great Pyramid of Giza, the factual accuracy of which I couldn't verify but whose telling kept me enthralled. Peter was a born *raconteur*: as he narrated his history, he would assume the voices of the different figures in it, from Pharaoh to slave. "The Great Pyramid," he would say, addressing the two of us as if we were a crowd at a lecture hall,

“was built for the Pharaoh Khufu. The Greeks called him Cheops. He lived during the Fourth Dynasty, which was about four and half thousand years ago. The moment he became Pharaoh, Khufu started planning his pyramid, because, really, it was the most important thing he was ever going to build. The Egyptians were terribly concerned with death, and spent much of their lives preparing for it. He picked a site on the western bank of the Nile. The Egyptians thought the western bank was a special place because the sun set in the west. The west was the place of the dead, if you like, the right place to build your tomb. That’s all it was, after all, a pyramid. Not that you’d know that from the name: it’s a Greek word, ‘pyramid;’ it comes from ‘wheat cake.’ The Greeks thought the pyramids looked like giant pointy wheat cakes. We get a lot of names for Egyptian things from the Greeks: like ‘pharaoh,’ which they adapted from an Egyptian word that meant ‘great house.’ And ‘sarcophagus,’ that comes from the Greek for ‘flesh-eating.’ Why they called funeral vaults flesh-eaters I’ll never know.” And so on. He did love a good digression, your cousin: he would have made a fine college professor.

So you see, all this is why I dispute your uncle’s claim that he was friendless, solitary: given the right set of circumstances, Peter could be positively garrulous. I have little trouble picturing him keeping the proprietor of a small bookshop, say, entertained with the story of the Pharaoh—I can’t remember his name—who angered his people so that after his death his statues and monuments were destroyed and he was not buried in his own tomb; no one knew what had become of his body. No one knew what happened to his son either. I planned to take Peter to the Met, to see their Egyptian collection, but for reasons I can’t recall we never went. At our final visit, he suggested we write. Initially, I demurred: I was buried in the last chapter of my dissertation, which I had expected to be forty pages I could write in a month but which rapidly had swelled to eighty-five pages that would consume my every waking moment for the next four months. We could write when I was finished, I explained. Peter pleaded with me, though, and in the end I agreed. We didn’t write much, just four letters from him and three replies from me.

I found myself leafing through Peter’s letters the winter after his visit, when your uncle telephoned your grandmother to inform her that your

cousin was missing: he had run away from home and no one knew where he was. Your grandmother was distraught; I was, too, when she called me with the news of Peter's vanishing. She was upset at George, who apparently had shown only the faintest trace of emotion while delivering to her what she rightly regarded as terrible information. He was sure Peter would turn up, George said, boys will be boys and all that, what can you do? Lack of proper family feeling in anyone bothered your grandmother; it was her pet peeve; and she found it a particularly egregious fault in one of her own, raised to know better. "It's a good thing your father isn't alive to see this," she said to me, and I was unsure whether she referred to Peter's running away or George's understated reaction to it.

At the time, I suspected Peter might be making his way to his mother's, and went so far as to contact Clarissa myself, but if such was her son's plan she knew nothing about it. Through her manners I could hear the distress straining her voice, and another thing, a reserve I initially could not understand. Granted that speaking to your former brother-in-law is bound to be awkward, Clarissa's reticence was still in excess of any such awkwardness. Gradually, as we stumbled our way through a conversation composed of half-starts and long pauses, I understood that she was possessed by a mixture of fear and loathing: fear, because she suspected me of acting in concert with my brother to trick and trap her (though what more she had left to lose at that point I didn't and don't know; her pride, I suppose); loathing, because she thought that I was cut from the same cloth as George. Whatever George had done to prompt her to seek divorce a dozen years before, her memory and repugnance of it remained sufficiently fresh to make talking to me a considerable effort.

Peter didn't appear at his mother's, or any other relative's, nor did he return to his father's house. Against George's wishes, I'm sure, Clarissa involved the police almost immediately. Because of her social standing and the social standing of her family, I'm equally sure, they brought all their resources to bear on Peter's disappearance. The case achieved a notoriety that briefly extended across the Atlantic, scandalizing your grandmother; though I'm not aware that anyone ever connected George to us. Suspecting the worst, the police focused their attentions on George, bringing him in for repeated and intense questioning, investigating his trips abroad, ransacking his

house. Strangely, in the midst of all this, Gaunt apparently went unnoticed. After subjecting George to close scrutiny for several weeks—which yielded no clue to where Peter might be or what might have happened to him—the detective in charge of the investigation fell dead of a heart attack while talking to your uncle on the telephone. As the man was no more than thirty, this was a surprise. His replacement was more kindly disposed to George, judging that he had undergone enough and concentrating the police's attentions elsewhere. Your cousin was not found; he was never found. Though your grandmother continued to hold out hope that he was alive until literally the day she died, thinking he might have found his way to Egypt, I didn't share her optimism, and reluctantly concluded that Peter had met his end.

I was correct, though I had no way of knowing how horrible that end had been. What happened to Peter took place while his father was out of the house; in Finland, he said. It was late winter; when Scotland has yet to free itself from its long nights and the sky is dark for much of the day. Peter had been living with his father's locked study for eleven years. So far as I know, he had shown no interest in the room in the past, which strikes me as a bit unusual, although I judge all other children's curiosity against yours, an unfair comparison. Perhaps George had told his own cautionary tale. There was no reason to expect Peter's interest to awaken at that moment, but it did. He became increasingly intrigued by that heavy door and what it concealed. I know this, you see, because it was in the first letter he sent to me, which arrived less than a month after his return home. He decided to confide in me, and I was flattered. Though he didn't write this to me, I believe he must have associated his father's study with those Egyptian tombs he'd been reading about; he must have convinced himself of a parallel between him entering that room and Howard Carter entering Tutankhamun's tomb. His father provided him a generous allowance, so I know he wasn't interested in money, as he himself was quick to reassure me in that same letter. He didn't want me to suspect his motives: he was after knowledge; he wanted to see what was hidden behind the dark door. Exactly how long that desire burned in him I can't say; he admitted that while he'd been wandering the woods behind your grandmother's house, he'd been envisioning himself walking through that room in his father's

house, imagining its contents. He didn’t specify what he thought those contents might be, and I wonder how accurate his imagination was. Did he picture the squat bookcases overstuffed with books, scrolls, and even stone tablets; the long tables heaped with goblets, boxes, candles, jars; the walls hung with paintings and drawings; the floor chalked with elaborate symbols? (I describe it well, don’t I? I’ve seen it—but that must wait.)

It was with his second letter that Peter first disclosed his plans to satisfy his curiosity; plans I encouraged, if only mildly, when at last I sent him a reply. He would have to be careful, I wrote, if he were caught, I had no doubt the consequences would be severe. I didn’t believe they actually would be, but I enjoyed participating in what I knew was, for your cousin, a great adventure. I suggested that he take things in stages, that he try a brief trip up to the attic stairs first and see how that went. What length of time was required for him to amass sufficient daring to venture the narrow flight of stairs to the attic landing I can’t say. Perhaps he climbed a few of the warped, creaking stairs one day, before his nerve broke and he bolted down them back to his room; then a few more the next day; another the day after that; and so on, adding a stair or two a day until at last he stood at the landing. Or perhaps he rushed up the staircase all at once, his heart pounding, his stomach weak, taking the stairs two and three at a time, at the great dark door almost before he knew it. Having reached the landing, was he satisfied with his accomplishment? or were his eyes drawn to the door, to the wide keyhole that offered a view of the room beyond? We hadn’t discussed that: did it seem too much, a kind of quantum leap from what he had risked scaling the stairs? or did it seem the next logical step: in for a penny, in for a pound, as it were? Once he stood outside the door, he couldn’t have waited very long to lower his eye to the keyhole. When he did, his mouth dry, his hands shaking slightly, expecting to hear either his father of Mr. Gaunt behind him at every moment, he was disappointed: the windows in the room were heavily curtained, the lights extinguished, leaving it dim to the point of darkness on even the brightest day, the objects inside no more than confused shadows.

Peter boiled down all of this to two lines in his third letter, which I received inside a Christmas card. “I finally went to the door,” he wrote, “and even looked in the keyhole! But everything was dark, and I couldn’t see at all.”

Well, I suggested in my response, he would need to spy through the door when the study was occupied. Why not focus on Mr. Gaunt and his nine o'clock visitations? His father's returns home were too infrequent and erratic to be depended upon, and I judged the consequences of discovery by his father to be far in excess of those of discovery by the butler. (If I'd known…) Peter felt none of my unease around Mr. Gaunt, which was understandable, given that the butler had been a fixture in his home and life for more than a decade. In his fourth and final letter, Peter thanked me for my suggestion. He had been pondering a means to pilfer Gaunt's key to the room, only to decide that, for the moment, such an enterprise involved a degree of risk whatever was in the room might not be worth. I had the right idea: best to survey the attic clearly, then plan his next step. He would wait until his father was going to be away for a good couple of week, which wouldn't be until February. In the meantime, he was trying to decipher the sounds of Mr. Gaunt's nightly hour in the study: the two heavy clumps, the faint slithering, the staccato clicks like someone walking across the floor wearing tap shoes. I replied that it could be the butler was practicing his dancing, which I thought was much funnier at the time than I realize now it was, but that it seemed more likely what Peter was hearing was some sort of cleaning procedure. He should be careful, I wrote, obviously, the butler knew Peter wasn't supposed to be at the study, and if he caught him there, he might very well become quite upset, as George could hold him responsible for Peter's trespass.

I didn't hear from Peter again. For a time, I assumed this was because his enterprise had been discovered and him punished by his father. Then I thought it must be because he was burdened with too much schoolwork: the tutors his father had brought to the house for him, he had revealed in his second letter, were most demanding. I intended to write to him, to inquire after the status of our plan, but whenever I remembered my intention I was in the middle of something else that absolutely had to be finished and couldn't be interrupted, or so it seemed, and I never managed even to begin a letter. Then George called your grandmother, to tell her Peter was gone.

It was more than a quarter-century until I learned Peter's fate. Sitting there on the back porch of the house in Highland, I heard it all from my older brother who, in turn, had had it from Gaunt. Oh yes, from Mr. Gaunt: our

story, you see, was never that far from the truth. Indeed, it was closer, much closer, than I wish it were.

George left Scotland for an extended trip to Finland the first week in February. He would be away, he told Peter, for at least two weeks, and possibly a third if the manuscripts he was going to view were as extensive as he hoped. Peter wore an appropriately glum face at his father's departure, which pleased George, who had no idea of his son's secret ambition. For the first week after his father left, Peter maintained his daily routine. When at last the appointed date for his adventure arrived, though, he spent it in a state of almost unbearable anticipation, barely able to maintain conversation with any of his shopkeeper friends, inattentive to his tutors, uninterested in his meals. This last would not have escaped Mr. Gaunt's notice.

After spending the late afternoon and early evening roaming through the first three floors of the house, leafing through the library, practicing his shots at the pool table, spinning the antique globe in the living room, Peter declared he was going to make an early night of it, which also would have caught the butler's attention. From first-hand experience, I can tell you that Peter was something of a night owl, retiring to bed only when your grandmother insisted and called him by his full name, and even then reading under the sheets with a flashlight. Gaunt may have suspected your cousin's intentions; I daresay he must have. This would explain why, an hour and a half after Peter said he was turning in, when his bedroom door softly creaked open and Peter, still fully dressed, crept out and slowly climbed the narrow staircase to the attic landing, he found the door to the study standing wide open. It could also be that the butler had grown careless, but that strikes me as unlikely. Whatever Mr. Gaunt was, he was most attentive.

Your cousin stood there at the top of the stairs, gazing at the room that stretched out like a hall and was lit by globed lights dangling from the slanting ceiling. He saw the overstuffed bookcases. He saw the tables heaped high with assorted objects. He saw the paintings crowding the walls, the chalked symbols swarming over the floor. If there was sufficient time for him to study anything in detail, he may have noticed the small Bosch painting, *The Alchemical Wedding*, hanging across from him. It was—and still is—thought lost. It's the typical Bosch scene, crowded with all manner

of people and creatures real and fantastic, most of them merrily dancing around the central figures, a man in red robes and a skeleton holding a rose being married by a figure combining features of a man and an eagle. The nearest table displayed a row of jars, each of them filled with pale, cloudy fluid in which floated a single, pink, misshapen fetus; approaching to examine them, he would have been startled to see the eyes of all the tiny forms open and stare at him. If any object caught his attention, it would have been the great stone sarcophagus leaning against the wall to his left, its carved face not the placid mask familiar to him from photos and drawings, but vivid and angry, its eyes glaring, its nostrils flaring, its mouth open wide and ringed with teeth. That would have chased any fear of discovery from his mind and brought him boldly into the study.

It could be, of course, that Peter's gaze, like the boy in our story's, was immediately captured by what was hanging on the antique coat-stand across from him.

At first, the boy thought it was a coat, for that is, after all, what you expect to find on a coat-stand. He assumed it must be Mr. Gaunt's coat, which the butler must have taken off and hung up when he entered the study. Why the butler should have been wearing a coat as long as this one, and with a hood and gloves attached, inside the house, the boy could not say. The more the boy studied it, however, the more he thought that it was a very strange coat indeed: for one thing, it was not so much that the coat was long as that there appeared to be a pair of pants attached to it, and, for another, its hood and gloves were unlike any he had seen before. Where the coat was black, the hood was a pale color that seemed familiar but that the boy could not immediately place. What was more, the hood seemed to be hairy, at least the back of it did, while the front contained a number of holes whose purpose the boy could not fathom. The gloves were of the same familiar color as the hood.

The boy stood gazing at the strange coat until he heard a noise coming from the other end of the study. He looked toward it, but saw nothing: just a tall skeleton dangling in front of another bookcase. He looked away and the noise repeated, a sound like a baby's rattle, only louder. The boy looked again and again saw nothing, only the bookcase and, in front of it, the skeleton. It took a moment for the boy to recognize that the skeleton was not

dangling, but standing. As he watched, its bare, grinning skull turned toward him, and something in the tilt of its head, the crook of its spine, sent the boy's eyes darting back to the odd coat. Now, he saw that it was a coat, and pants, and hands, and a face: Mr. Gaunt's hands and face. Which must mean, he realized, that the skeleton at the other end of the room, which replaced the book it had been holding on top of the bookcase and stepped in his direction, was Mr. Gaunt. The boy stared at the skeleton slowly walking across the room, still far but drawing closer, its blank eyes fixed on him, and, with a scream, ran back down the stairs. Behind him, he heard the rattle of the skeleton's pursuit.

There in his father's study, your cousin Peter saw a human skeleton, Mr. Gaunt's skeleton—or the skeleton that was Gaunt—rush toward him from the other side of the room. The skeleton was tall, slightly stooped, and when it moved, its dull yellow bones clicked against each other like a chorus of baby rattles. Peter screamed, then bolted the room. He leapt down the attic stairs two and three at a time, pausing at the fourth floor landing long enough to throw closed the door to the stairs and grasp at the key that usually rested in its lock but now was gone, taken, he understood, by Mr. Gaunt. Peter ran down the long hallway to the third floor stairs and half-leapt down them. He didn't bother with the door at the third floor landing: he could hear that chorus of rattles clattering down the stairs, too close already. He raced through the three rooms that lay between the third floor landing and the stairway to the second floor, hearing Gaunt at his back as he hurdled beds, chairs, couches; ducked drapes; rounded corners. A glance over his shoulder showed the skeleton running after him like some great awkward bird, its head bobbing, its knees raised high. He must have been terrified; there would have been no way for him not to have been terrified. Imagine your own response to such a thing. I wouldn't have been able to run; I would have been paralyzed, as much by amazement as by fear. As it was, Gaunt almost had him when Peter tipped over a globe in his path and he fell crashing behind him. With a final burst of speed, Peter descended the last flight of stairs and made the front door, which he heaved open and dashed through into the street.

Between Peter's house and the house to its left as you stood looking out the front door was a close, an alley. Peter rushed to and down it. It could be that

panic drove him, or that he meant to evade Gaunt by taking a route he thought unknown to the butler. If the latter was the case, the sound of bones rattling across the cobblestones, a look back at the naked grin and the arm grasping at him, would have revealed his error instantly, with no way for him to double-back safely. I suspect the skeleton did something to herd Peter to that alley, out of sight of any people who might be on the street; I mean it worked a spell of some kind. The alley sloped down, gradually at first, then steeply, ending at the top of a series of flights of stone stairs descending the steep hillside to Market Street below. From Market Street, it's not that far to the train station, which may have been Peter's ultimate destination. His heart pounding, his breath rushing in and out, he sped down the hill, taking the stairs two, three, four at a time, his shoes snapping loudly on the stone, the skeleton close, swiping at him with a claw that tugged the collar of his sweater but failed to hold it.

Halfway down the stairs, not yet to safety but in sight of it, Peter's left foot caught his right foot, tripping and tumbling him down the remaining stairs to the landing below, where he smashed into the bars of an iron guardrail. Suddenly, there was no air in his lungs. As he lay sprawled on his back, trying to breathe, the skeleton was on him, descending like a hawk on a mouse. He cried out, covering his eyes. Seizing him by the sweater front, Gaunt hauled Peter to his feet. For a second that seemed to take years, that fleshless smile was inches from his face, as if it were subjecting him to the most intense scrutiny. He could smell it: an odor of thick dust, with something faintly rancid beneath it, that brought the bile to his throat. He heard a sound like the whisper of sand blowing across a stone floor, and realized it was the skeleton speaking, bringing speech from across what seemed a great distance. It spoke one word, "Yes," drawing it out into a long sigh that did not stop so much as fade away: *Yyyeeeeeesssssss.*… Then it jerked its head away, and began pulling him back up the stairs, to the house and, he knew, the study. When, all at once, his lungs inflated and he could breathe again, Peter tried to scream. The skeleton slapped its free hand across his mouth, digging the sharp ends of its fingers and thumb into his cheeks, and Peter desisted. They reached the top of the stairs and made their way up the close. How no one could have noticed them, I can't say, though I suspect the skeleton had done something to insure their

invisibility; yes, more magic. At the front door, Peter broke Gaunt's grip and attempted to run, but he had not taken two steps before he was caught by the hair, yanked off his feet, and his head was slammed against the pavement. His vision swimming, the back of his head a knot of agony, Peter was led into the house. His knee cracked on an end-table; his shoulder struck a doorframe. As he was dragged to the study, did he speak to the creature whose claw clenched his arm? A strange question, perhaps, but since first I heard this story myself I have wondered it. Your cousin had a short time left to live, which he may have suspected; even if he did not, he must have known that what awaited him in the study would not be pleasant, to say the least. Did he apologize for his intrusion? Did he try to reason with his captor, promise his secrecy? Or did he threaten it, invoke his father's wrath on his return? Was he quiet, stoic or stunned? Was his mind buzzing with plans of last minute escape, or had it accepted that such plans were beyond him?

There are moments when the sheer unreality of an event proves overwhelming, when, all at once, the mind can't embrace the situation unfolding around it and refuses to do so, withholding its belief. Do you know what I mean? When your grandfather died, later that same afternoon I can remember feeling that his death was not yet permanent, that there was some means still available by which I could change it, and although I didn't know what that means was, I could feel it trembling on the tip of my brain. When your mother told me that she was leaving me for husband number two, that they already had booked a flight together for the Virgin Islands, even as I thought, Well it's about time: I wondered how long it would take this to arrive, I also was thinking, This is not happening: this is a joke: this is some kind of elaborate prank she's worked up, most likely with someone else, someone at the school, probably one of my colleagues; let's see, who loves practical jokes? While she explained the way my faults as a husband had led her to her decision, I was trying to analyze her sentence structure, word choice, to help me determine who in the department had helped her script her lines. A few years later, when she called to tell me about husband number three, I was much more receptive. All of which is to say that, if it was difficult for me to accommodate events that occur on a daily basis, how

much more difficult would it have been for your cousin to accept being dragged to his father's study by a living skeleton?

Once they were in the study, Gaunt wasted no time, making straight for the great stone sarcophagus. Peter screamed with all the force he could muster, calling for help from anyone who could hear him, then wailing in pure animal terror. The skeleton made no effort to silence him. At the sarcophagus with its furious visage, Gaunt brought his stark face down to Peter's a second time, as if for a last look at him. He heard that faint whisper again, what sounded like the driest of chuckles. Then it reached out and slid the massive stone lid open with one spindly arm. The odor of decay, the ripe stench of a dead deer left at the side of the road for too many hot days, filled the room. Gagging, Peter saw that the interior of the sarcophagus was curiously rough, not with the roughness of, say, sandstone, but with a deliberate roughness, as if the stone had been painstakingly carved into row upon row of small sharp points, like teeth. The skeleton flung him into that smell, against those points. Before he could make a final, futile gesture of escape, the lid closed and Peter was in darkness, swathed in the thick smell of rot, his last sight the skeleton's idiot grin. Nor was that the worst. He had been in the stone box only a few seconds, though doubtless it seemed an eternity, when the stone against which he was leaning grew warm. As it warmed, it shifted, the way the hide of an animal awakening from a deep sleep twitches. Peter jerked away from the rough stone, his heart in his throat as movement rippled through the coffin's interior. If he could have been fortunate, his terror would have jolted him into unconsciousness, but I know this was not the case. If he was unlucky, as I know he was, he felt the sides of the sarcophagus abruptly swell toward him, felt the rows of sharp points press against him, lightly at first, then more insistently, then more insistently still, until—

I've mentioned the root of the word "sarcophagus;" it was Peter, ironically enough, who told it to me. It's Greek: it means "flesh eating." Exactly how that word came to be applied to large stone coffins I'm unsure, but in this case it was quite literally true. Peter was enclosed within a kind of mouth, a great stone mouth, and it… consumed him. The process was not quick. By the time George returned to the house almost a week and a half later, however, it was complete. Sometime in the long excruciation before that

point, Peter must have realized that his father was implicated in what was happening to him. It was impossible for him not to be. His father had brought Mr. Gaunt into the house, and then left Peter at his mercy. His beloved father had failed, and his failure was Peter's death.

It took George longer than I would have expected, almost two full days, to discover Peter's fate, and to discern the butler's role in it. When he did so, he punished, as he put it, Mr. Gaunt suitably. He did not tell me what such punishment involved, but he did assure me that it was thorough. Peter's running away was, obviously, the ruse invented by George to hide his son's actual fate.

By the time your uncle told me the story I've told you, Clarissa had been dead for several years. I hadn't spoken to her since our phone conversation when Peter first vanished, and, I must confess, she had been absent from my thoughts for quite some time when I stumbled across her obituary on the opposite side of an article a friend in London had clipped and sent me. The obituary stated that she had never recovered from the disappearance of her only son almost two decades prior, and hinted, if I understood its inference, that she had been addicted to antidepressants; although the writer hastened to add that the cause of death had been ruled natural and was under no suspicion from the police.

If George heard the news of his former wife's death, which I assume he must have, he made no mention of it to me, not even during that last conversation, when so much else was said. Although I hadn't planned it, we both became quite intoxicated, making our way through the better part of a bottle of Lagavulin after I had put you to bed. The closer I approach to complete intoxication, the nearer I draw to maudlin sentimentality, and it wasn't long, as I sat beside my older brother looking across the Hudson to Poughkeepsie, the place where we had been born and raised and where our parents were buried, I say it wasn't long before I told George to stay where he was, I had something for him. Swaying like a sailor on a ship in a heavy sea, I made my way into the house and to my study, where I located the shoebox in which I keep those things that have some measure of sentimental value to me, pictures, mostly, but also the letters that your cousin had sent me, tucked in their envelopes. Returning to the porch, I walked over to George and held them out to him, saying, "Here, take them."

He did so, a look that was half-bemusement, half-curiosity on his face. “All right,” he said. “What are they?”

“Letters,” I declared.

“I can see that, old man,” he said. “Letters from whom?”

“From Peter,” I said. “From your son. You should have them. I want you to have them.”

“Letters from Peter,” he said.

“Yes,” I said, nodding vigorously.

“I was unaware the two of you had maintained a correspondence.”

“It was after the summer he came to stay with Mother. The two of us hit it off, you know, quite well.”

“As a matter of fact,” George said, “I didn’t know.” He continued to hold the letters out before him, as if he were weighing them. The look on his face had slid into something else.

Inspired by the Scotch, I found the nerve to ask George what I had wanted to ask him for so long: if he ever had received any word, any kind of hint, as to what had become of Peter? His already flushed face reddened more, as if he were embarrassed, caught off-guard, then he laughed and said he knew exactly what had happened to his son. “Exactly,” he repeated, letting the letters fall from his hand like so many pieces of paper.

Despite the alcohol in which I was swimming, I was shocked, which I’m sure my face must have shown. All at once, I wanted to tell George not to say anything more, because I had intuited that I was standing at the doorway to a room I did not wish to enter, for, once I stood within it, I would discover my older brother to be someone—something—I would be unable to bear sitting beside. We were not and had never been as close as popular sentiment tells us siblings should be; we were more friendly acquaintances. It was an acquaintance, however, I had increasingly enjoyed as I grew older, and I believe George’s feelings may have been similar. But my tongue was thick and sluggish in my mouth, and so, as we sat on the back porch, George related the circumstances of his son’s death to me. I listened to him as evening dimmed to night, making no move to switch on the outside lights, holding onto my empty glass as if it were a life-preserver.

As his tale progressed, my first thought was that he was indulging in a bizarre joke whose tastelessness was appalling; the more he spoke, however, the more I understood that he believed what he was telling me, and I feared he might be delusional if not outright mad; by the story's conclusion, I was no longer sure he was mad, and worried that I might be. I was unsure when he stopped talking: his words continued to sound in my ears, overlapping each other. A long interval elapsed during which neither of us spoke and the sound of the crickets was thunderous. At last George said, "Well?"

"Gaunt," I said. "Who is he?" It was the first thing to leap to mind.

"Gaunt," he said. "Gaunt was my teacher. I met him when I went to Oxford; the circumstances are not important. He was my master. Once, I should have called him my father." I can not tell you what the tone of his voice was. "We had a disagreement, which grew into an… altercation, which ended with him inside the stone sarcophagus that had Peter, though not for as long, of course. I released him while there was still enough left to be of service to me. I thought him defeated, no threat to either me or mine, and, I will admit, it amused me to keep him around. I had set what I judged sufficient safeguards against him in place, but he found a way to circumvent them, which I had not thought possible without a tongue. I was in error."

"Why Peter?" I asked.

"To strike at me, obviously. He had been planning something for quite a length of time. I had some idea of the depth of his hate for me, but I had no idea his determination ran to similar depths. His delight at what Peter had suffered was inestimable. He had written a rather extended description of it, which I believe he thought I would find distressing to read. The stone teeth relentlessly pressing every square inch of flesh, until the skin burst and blood poured out; the agony as the teeth continued through into the muscle, organ, and, eventually, bone; the horror at finding oneself still alive, unable to die even after so much pain: he related all of this with great gusto.

"The sarcophagus, in case you're interested, I found in eastern Turkey, not, as you might think, Egypt; though I suspect it has its origins there I first read about it in *Les Mystères du Ver*, though the references were highly elliptical, to say the least. It took years, and a small fortune, to locate it.

Actually, it’s a rather amusing story: it was being employed as a table by a bookseller, if you can believe it, who had received it as payment for a debt owed him by a local banker, who in turn…”

I listened to George’s account of the sarcophagus’s history, all the while thinking of poor Peter trapped inside it, wrapped in claustrophobic darkness, screaming and pounding on the lid as—what? Although, as I have said, I half-believed the fantastic tale George had told, my belief was only partial. It seemed more likely Peter had suffocated inside the coffin, then Gaunt disposed of the body in such a way that very little, if any, of it remained. When George was done talking, I asked, “What about Peter?”

“What about him?” George answered. “Why, ‘What about Peter’? I’ve already told you, it was too late for me to be able to do anything, even to provide him the kind of half-life Gaunt has, much less successfully restore him. What the sarcophagus takes, it does surrender.”

“He was your son,” I said.

“Yes,” George said. “And?”

“ ‘And’? My God, man, he was your son, and whatever did happen to him, he’s dead and you were responsible for his death, if not directly then through negligence. Doesn’t that mean anything to you?”

“No,” George said, his voice growing brittle. “As I have said, Peter’s death, while unfortunate, was unintentional.”

“But,” I went on, less and less able, it seemed, to match thought to word with any proficiency, “but he was your son.”

“So?” George said. “Am I supposed to be wracked by guilt, afflicted with remorse?”

“Yes,” I said, “yes, you are.”

“I’m not, though. When all is said and done, Peter was more trouble than he was worth. A man in my position—and though you might not believe it, my position is considerable—doing my kind of work, can’t always be worrying about someone else, especially a child. I should have foreseen that when I divorced Clarissa, and let her have him, but I was too concerned with her absolute defeat to make such a rational decision. Even after I knew the depth of my mistake, I balked at surrendering Peter to her because I

knew the satisfaction such an admission on my part would give Clarissa. I simply could not bear that. For a time, I deluded myself that Peter would be my apprentice, despite numerous clear indications that he possessed no aptitude of any kind for my art. He was… temperamentally unsuited. It is a shame: there would have been a certain amount of pleasure in passing on my knowledge to my son, to someone of my own blood. That has always been my problem: too sentimental, too emotional. Nonetheless, while I would not have done anything to him myself, I am forced to admit that Peter's removal from my life has been to the good."

"You can't be serious," I said.

"I am."

"Then you're a monster."

"To you, perhaps," he said.

"You're mad," I said.

"No, I'm not," he said, and from the sharp tone of his voice, I could tell I had touched a nerve, so I repeated myself, adding, "Do you honestly believe you're some kind of great and powerful magician? or do you prefer to be called a sorcerer? Perhaps you're a wizard? a warlock? an alchemist? No, they worked with chemicals; I don't suppose that would be you. Do you really expect me to accept that tall butler as some kind of supernatural creature, an animated skeleton? I won't ask where you obtained his face and hands: I'm sure Jenner's has a special section for the black arts." I went on like this for several minutes, pouring out my scorn on George, feeling the anger radiating from him. I did not care: I was angry myself, furious, filled with more rage than ever before or ever after, for that matter.

When I was through, or when I had paused, anyway, George asked, "Could you fetch me a glass of water?"

"Excuse me?" I said.

He repeated his request: "Could I have a glass of water?" explaining, "All this conversation has left my throat somewhat parched."

Your grandmother's emphasis on good manners, no matter what the situation, caught me off guard, and despite myself I heard my voice saying, "Of course," as I set down my glass, stood, and made my way across the

unlit porch to the back door. “Can I get you anything else?” I added, trying to sound as scornful as I felt.

“The water will be fine.”

I opened the back door, stepped into the house, and was someplace else. Instead of the kitchen, I was standing at one end of a long room lit by globed lights depending from a slanted ceiling. Short bookcases filled to bursting with books, scrolls, and an occasional stone tablet jostled with one another for space along the walls, while tables piled high with goblets, candles, boxes, rows of jars, models, took up the floor. I saw paintings crowding the walls, including the Bosch I described to you, and elaborate symbols drawn on the floor. At the other end of the room, a bulky stone sarcophagus with a fierce face reclined against a wall. Behind me, through the open door whose handle I still grasped, I could hear the crickets; in front of me, through the room’s curtained windows, I could hear the sound of distant traffic, of brakes squealing and horns blowing. I stood gazing at the room I understood to be my brother’s study, and then I felt the hand on my shoulder. Initially, I thought it was George, but when he called, “Is my water coming?” I realized he had not left his seat. Through my shirt, the hand felt wrong: at once too light and too hard, more like wood than flesh. The faintest odor of dust, and beneath it, something foul, filled my nostrils; the sound of a baby’s rattle being turned, slowly, filled my ears. I heard another sound, the whisper of sand blowing across a stone floor, and realized it was whatever was behind me—but I knew what it was—speaking, bringing speech from across what seemed a great distance. It spoke one word, “Yes,” drawing it out into a long sigh that did not stop so much as fade away: *Yyyeeeeeesssssss…*

“I say,” George said, “where’s my water?”

Inhaling deeply—the hand tightening on my shoulder as I did—I said, “Tell him—tell it to remove its hand from me.”

“Him? It? Whatever are you referring to?”

“Gaunt,” I answered. “Tell Gaunt to release my shoulder.”

“Gaunt?” George cried, his voice alive with malicious amusement, “Why, Gaunt’s on the other side of the ocean.”

“This is not entertaining,” I said, willing myself to remain where I was.

“You’re right,” George said. “In fact, it’s deeply worrying. Are you certain you’re feeling all right? Did you have too much to drink? Or are you, perhaps, not in your right mind? Are you mad, dear brother?”

“Not in the least,” I replied. “Nor, it would seem, are you.”

“Ahh,” George said. “Are you certain?”

“Yes,” I said, “I am sure.” I might have added, “To my profound regret,” but I had no wish to antagonize him any further.

“In that case,” George said, and the hand left my shoulder. I heard rattling, as if someone were walking away from me across the porch in tapshoes, followed by silence. “Now that I think on it,” George said, “I needn’t bother you for that glass of water, after all. Why don’t you rejoin me?”

I did as he instructed, closing the door tightly. I walked to George and said, in a voice whose shaking I could not master, “It is time for you to go.”

After a pause, George said, “Yes, I suppose it is, isn’t it?”

“I will not be asking you back,” I said.

“No, I don’t suppose you will. I could just appear, you know.”

“You will not,” I said, vehemently. “You will never come here again. I forbid you.”

“You forbid me?”

“Yes, I do.”

“I find that most entertaining, as you say. However, I shall respect your wishes, lest it be said I lack fraternal affection. It’s a pity: that time you came to visit me after Peter’s death, I thought you might be my apprentice, and the notion has never vanished from my mind. It generally surfaces when I’m feeling mawkish. I suppose there’s no chance—”

“None,” I said, “now or ever.” You have Satan’s nerve, I thought.

“Yes, of course,” George said. “I knew what your reply would be: I merely had to hear you say it. When all is said and done, I don’t suppose you have the necessary… temperament either. No matter: there are others, one of them closer than you think.”

That was his final remark. George had brought no luggage with him: he stepped off the porch into the night and was gone. I stood staring out into

the darkness, listening for I am not sure what, that rattling, perhaps, before rushing to the kitchen door. Gripping the doorknob, I uttered a brief, barely coherent prayer, then opened the door. The kitchen confronted me with its rows of hanging pots and pans, its magnetic knife rack, its sink full of dishes awaiting washing. I raced through it, up the stairs to your room, where I found you asleep, one arm around Mr. James, your bear, the other thrown across your face as if you were seeking to hide your eyes from something. My legs went weak, and I seated myself on your bed, a flood of hot tears rolling down my face. I sat up in your room for the rest of that night, and for a week or so after I slept in it with you. The following morning, I returned to the back porch to retrieve your cousin's letters, which I replaced in the shoebox.

I have not heard from George since, all these years.

When I sat you on your bed after having found you surrounded by the shreds of my work, this was what shaped itself into my cautionary tale. It had been festering in my brain ever since George had told me it. Carrying George's words with me had left me feeling tainted, as if having heard of Peter's end had made me complicit in it in a manner beyond my ability to articulate. In giving that story voice, I sought to exorcise it from me. I recognize the irony of my situation: rather than expunging the story, telling it once led to it being told over and over again, until it had achieved almost the status of ritual. Your subsequent delight in the story did mitigate my guilt somewhat, tempting me to remark that a story's reception may redeem its inception; that, however, would be just a bit too much, too absolutely over the top, as James would put it. I remain incredulous at myself for having told you even the highly edited version you heard. It occurs to me that, if it is a wonder our children survive the mistakes we make with them, it is no less astounding that we are not done in by them ourselves; those of us with any conscience, I should add.

Something else: how much you remember of the literature classes you sat through in college I don't know; I realize you took them to please me. I'm sure, however, that enough of the lectures you actually attended has remained with you for you to be capable of at least a rudimentary analysis of our story. In such an analysis, you would treat the figure of the skeleton as a symbol. I can imagine, for example, a psychoanalytic interpretation

such as are so often applied to fairy tales. It would judge our particular story to be a cleverly disguised if overly Oedipal allegory in which the locked room would be equated with the secret of sexuality, jealously guarded by the father against the son, and the butler/skeleton with the father's double, an image of death there to punish the boy for his transgression. If you preferred to steer closer to history, you might postulate the skeleton as a representation of an event: say, Mr. Gaunt and your uncle caught in an embrace, another kind of forbidden knowledge. Neither these nor any other interpretations are correct: the skeleton is not a substitution for something else but in fact real; I must insist, even if in doing so I seem to depart plausibility for fantasy, if not dementia. It could be that I protest too much, that you aren't the rigid realist I'm construing you to be. Perhaps you know how easy it is to find yourself on the other side of the looking glass.

No doubt, you'll wonder why I've waited until now to disclose this information to you, when you've been old enough to have heard it for years. I'd like to attribute my reticence solely to concern for you, to worry that, listening to this outrageous tale, you would lose no time setting out to verify it, which might result in your actually making contact with your uncle, and then God only knows what else. I am anxious for you, but, to be honest, more of my hesitation than I want to admit arises from dread at appearing ridiculous in your eyes, of seeing your face fill with pity at the thought that the old man has plunged over the edge at last. I suppose that's why I'm recording this, when I know it would be easy enough to pick up the phone and give you a call.

I can't believe I could be of any interest to George at this late date (so I tell myself), but I'm less sure about you. Sitting up in my bed last night, not watching the remainder of the documentary, I heard your uncle tell me that there were others to serve as his apprentice, one of them closer than I thought. These words ringing in my ears, I thought of that Ouija board you used to play with in college, the tarot card program you bought for your computer. I understand the Ouija board was because of that girl you were seeing, and I know the computer program is just for fun, but either might be sufficient for George. Your uncle is old, and if he hasn't yet found an apprentice—

However belated, this, then, all of this tangled testament, is my warning to you about your uncle, as well as a remembrance of a kind of your cousin, whom you never knew. If you believe me—and you must, Henry, you must—you'll take heed of my warning. If you don't believe me, and I suppose that is a possibility, at least I may have entertained you one last time. All that remains now is for me to tell you I love you, son, I love you and please, please, please be careful Henry: be careful.

3

With a snap, the stereo reached the end of the tape. Henry Farange released a breath he hadn't been aware he was holding and slumped back on the couch. His beer and the pleasant lassitude it had brought were long gone; briefly, he contemplated going to the refrigerator for another bottle, and possibly the rest of the six-pack while he was at it. Heaving himself to his feet and shaking his head, he murmured, "God."

To say he didn't know what to think was the proverbial understatement. As his father had feared, his initial impression was that the old man had lost it there at the end, that he had, in his own words, suffered one mini-stroke too many. But—what? What else was there to say? That he had felt some measure of truth in his father's words? That—mad, yes, as it sounded—a deeper part of him, a much deeper part, a half-fossilized fragment buried far beneath his reflexive disbelief, accepted what the old man had been telling him?

Well, actually, that was it exactly, thank you for asking. Laughable as it seemed; and he did laugh, a humorless bark; Henry couldn't bring himself to discount completely his father's words. There had been something—no single detail; rather, a quality in the old man's voice—that had affected him, had unearthed that half-ossified part of him, had insinuated itself into his listening until, in the end, he found himself believing there was more to this tape than simple dementia. When Henry had been a child, his father had possessed the unfailing ability to tell when he was lying, or so it seemed; even when there was no obvious evidence of his dishonesty, somehow, the old man had known. Asked the source of this mysterious and frustrating power, his father had shrugged and said, "It's in your voice," as if this were

the most obvious of explanations. Now, hearing those words echoing in his mind, Henry thought, It's in his voice.

But—a living skeleton? An uncle who was a black magician? A cousin he'd never heard of devoured by a coffin made of living stone? He shook his head again, sighing: there was some truth here, but it was cloaked in metaphor. It had to be. He walked over to the stereo, popped open the tape deck, slid out the tape, and stood with it in his hand, feeling it still warm. His father's voice… Although the old man had quoted their story's beginning and middle, he had not recited its end. The words rose unbidden to Henry's lips: *"Slowly, the skeleton carried the screaming boy up the stairs to his father's study. It walked through the open doorway, closing the door behind it with a solid click. For a long time, that door stayed closed. When at last it opened again, Mr. Gaunt, looking more pleased with himself than anyone in that house ever had seen him, stepped out and made his way down the stairs, rubbing his hands together briskly. As for the boy who had opened the door he was forbidden to open: he was never seen again. What happened to him, I cannot say, but I can assure you, it was terrible."*

The phone rang, and he jumped, fumbling the tape onto the floor. Hadn't he switched that off? Leaving the cassette where it lay, he ran into the kitchen, catching the phone on the third ring and calling, "Hello."

His Uncle George said, "Hello, Henry."

"Uncle George!" he answered, a smile breaking over his face.

"How is everything?" his uncle asked.

"Fine, fine," he said. "I was just getting ready to call you."

"Uh oh."

"Yeah, it looks like I'm going to be a few minutes late to dinner."

"Can you still make it? Should we wait for another night?"

"No, no," Henry said, "there's no need to reschedule. I was just listening to something, a tape; I got kind of caught up in it, lost track of time."

"Music?"

"No, something my father left me. Actually, I was kind of hoping we could talk about it."

“Of course. What is it?”

“I’d rather wait until we see each other, if that’s all right with you. Listen: can you call the restaurant, tell them we’re running about fifteen minutes late?”

“Certainly. Will that be enough time for you?”

“I can be very fast when I need to be; you’d be amazed. Do you have their number?”

“I believe so. If not, I can look it up.”

“Great, great. Okay. Let me run and get ready, and I’ll see you shortly.”

“Excellent. I’m looking forward to this, Henry. I haven’t seen you in—well, to tell you the truth, I can’t remember how long, which means it’s been too long.”

“Hear hear,” he said. “I’m looking forward to it too. There’s a lot I want to ask you.”

“I’m glad to hear it, son: there’s much I have to tell you.”

“I’m sure you do. I can’t wait to hear it.”

“Well, this should be a fine, if melancholic, occasion. A Farange family reunion: there haven’t been too many of those, I can assure you. What a pity your poor father can’t join us. Oh, and Henry? one more thing?”

“What is it?”

“Would it be too much trouble if my butler joined us for dinner?” As Henry’s stomach squeezed his uncle went on, “I’m embarrassed to ask, but I’m afraid I am getting on in years a bit, and I find I can’t do much without his help these days. The joys of aging! He’s a very quiet chap, though: won’t say two words all evening. I hate to impose when we haven’t seen each other…”

His mouth dry, Henry stuttered, “Your butler?”

“Yes,” his uncle said. “Butler, manservant: ‘personal assistant,’ I suppose you would call him. If it’s going to be an intrusion—”

Recovering himself, Henry swallowed and said, “Nonsense, it’s no trouble at all. I’ll be happy to have him there.”

“Splendid. To tell the truth, he doesn’t get out much any more: he’ll be most pleased.”

“I’ll see you there.”

Henry replaced the phone in its cradle, and hurried to the shower. As he stood with the hot water streaming down on him, his uncle’s voice in one ear, his father’s voice in the other, he had a vision, both sudden and intense. He saw a boy, dressed in brown slacks and a brown sweater a half-size too big for him, standing at a landing at the top of a flight of stairs. In front of him was a great oaken door, open the slightest hairsbreath. The boy stood looking at the door, at the wedge of yellow light spilling out from whatever lay on the other side of it. The light was the color of old bones, and it seemed to form an arrow, pointing the boy forward.

Tutorial

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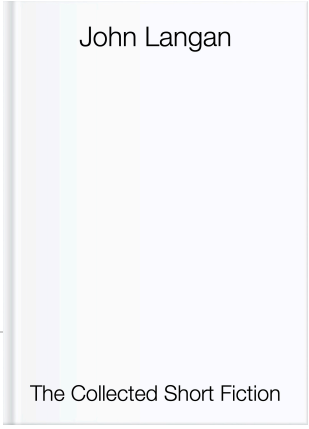


Asked to describe the writing tutor, James would have written, "To say the man was fat would have been not so much inaccurate as incomplete. The man was fat: no euphemisms would hide the collar of flesh encircling his neck; the sleeves of skin draping his arms; the great waistcoat of stomach bunched in front of him. But there are, after all, many ways to be fat, many ways to wear one's excess. Flesh magnifies who we are already: who has never met the archetypal happy fat man, whose bulk seems so much compacted jollity? and who has not encountered the large angry man whose mass is a thundercloud trembling on the brink of explosion? This man, then, was a particularly tremulous kind of fat: the skin rolled down his frame in an arrested avalanche, giving the impression that, at an undisclosed future moment, his body would fall away from him in a crashing rush. For all his size, there was something strangely hollow, insubstantial, about this man, as if he were a giant bubble or cluster of bubbles, dangerously close to bursting." James would have tried to capture the peculiar way that the man's very bulk contributed to the impression of his fragility before moving on to his crewcut head, to the round, sweat-rimmed glasses pressing into his face, to the mouth pursing as he read through the paper on his desk. He would have elaborated on the tutor's white button-down shirt, the black plastic wristwatch tourniquetting his left wrist; all in all, James reckoned he could have spent a good page or two of single-spaced, ten-point type on this man, whose name he thought was Sean but wasn't sure.

And, he thought sourly, his creative writing professor—Privates, as he secretly called him, after his most famous novel, The Private Visitor, which James had read and renamed The Visitor's Privates—would have returned those pages looking as they always did, as if they had been bled on, scoring

out words, phrases, paragraphs, the occasional page; filling the margins with assorted question marks and exclamation points; ending with a block-capital reproof: "HOW MANY TIMES DO I HAVE TO TELL YOU, MR. WILLIAMSON, THAT PROSE IS ARCHITECTURE, NOT INTERIOR DECORATION? YOU ARE, I REMIND YOU, A TYRO. ACCEPT THAT YOU DO NOT KNOW ANYTHING AND WRITE ABOUT IT CLEARLY. THE BAROQUE IS OVER." It had been the same with each of the five weekly assignments James had submitted so far, each story returned scored and scarred and, despite himself, James with it. His ideas, the professor wrote, were absurd: "Science Fiction and Fantasy stories are the province of the perpetual adolescent"; "Horror stories are meant for groups of drunken teenagers sitting around the campfire, not the printed page." Nor was Privates enamored of James's style: "Read Strunk and White, Mr. Williamson, and learn to Omit Needless Words." The trend had culminated in his creative writing professor's insistence that he consult the tutoring center to see if they could help him with his absolutely unmanageable syntax, his extraordinary and ridiculous tropes. James had been the only member of Creative Writing I singled out for a visit to The Writing Scene, which distinction Privates had shared with the rest of the class. Had he not been teetering on the brink of failing this class that was supposed to be the cornerstone of his prospective major in Creative Writing, James would have refused, stolen a line from a favorite story and told the professor he would prefer not to. As it was, his string of D-minuses had led him here, to the sub-sub-basement of the Humanities Building.

With a snort, the tutor looked up from James's paper. "Well," he said in a voice that James thought surprisingly nasal for a man with such a small nose. "Well well well." The tutor had placed his hands palm-down on his desk as he was reading; now they fluttered up from it, as if trying to break off and fly away.

James said nothing: he might have no choice about coming here, but that didn't necessitate his being excessively cooperative. On the wall behind him, a clock chopped off the seconds. He glanced at the bare white walls to either side of him, behind the tutor. Overhead, fluorescent lights hummed and snapped.

The tutor (Sean?) cleared his throat and asked, "What was the assignment?"

"To write about loss," James said.

"Loss, yes." He raised one hand, passed it over James's paper. "And you wrote about a man whose heart is literally cut out and stolen from him by a mysterious figure. Would you say that's an accurate summary?"

"It's a kind of fable," James said, shifting in his molded plastic seat.

"A fable, yes. How very interesting. Is that what you write, Mr. Williamson? Fables?"

"Sometimes. Sometimes I write other things."

"Such as?"

James shrugged. "Science fiction, fantasy, horror: that kind of stuff."

"Mmm. Not much for realism, then?"

"I wouldn't say that."

"Oh?"

"There are more ways to be realistic than writing about frustrated professors lusting after their students." Which was, James thought acidly, Privates's entire career summarized in twenty words or less.

Sean(?) blinked. "You don't say."

"Yeah: there's emotional realism, psychological realism, moral realism, aesthetic realism."

"Right," the tutor said. "And you expect to achieve this by writing about a man who has his heart cut out."

"I want to use metaphor."

"Ahh, metaphor. You do love your metaphors, it's true; to a fault, I would say."

"What's wrong with metaphors?" James asked.

"Used sparingly and judiciously, nothing. But yours are rather baroque, aren't they?"

"If you say so."

The tutor frowned. "Maybe we could try a writing exercise."

"All right."

"Let's look at one of your sentences." Sean(?)'s hands moved over James's story, as if to catch a sentence by the tail and hold it up for inspection. He stabbed the middle of the page with his finger: "This one should do. 'Carl turned the doorknob, feeling as he did so a deep, unreasoning dread for which he could not account, since, although he did not know who had rung the doorbell, he had no reason for suspecting it to be anything more than the mailman, or another of the peregrinating Christian missionaries who appeared from time to time offering salvation; nonetheless, as he swung open the front door, he felt the same sensation he had that day in the hospital when he had seen the doctor walking toward him and had known that the news about his father was bad.' Whew!" Sean?—say Sean—laughed, "That's quite a sentence."

"Yes it is," James said stiffly.

"Let's be honest: it runs on a bit. At the very least, it could use a period or two to break it up into more manageable units. Really, though, it's in dire need of pruning, wouldn't you say? So: can you tell me how you might shorten it?"

"No."

"No?"

"I wouldn't shorten it. I'm happy with it the way it is."

"You don't think it gives your reader any trouble?"

"In what way?"

"There is the matter of clarity."

"Define clarity."

The tutor frowned. "Mr. Williamson, you're being quite difficult—"

"I'm not," James said. "I'm just asking you to define what constitutes clarity in writing."

"Ease of comprehension. Will that do for you?"

"What couldn't you understand about that sentence?"

"Well, it wasn't that I couldn't—I mean, your style is rather tortured—"

"'Tortured'?" James echoed, leaning forward. "How is my style 'tortured'?"

Laughing, waving his hands, Sean said, "Obviously, you've never heard of Strunk and White."

"I've read *The Elements of Style*."

"You'd never know it, to read your writing. What happened to 'Omit Needless Words'?"

"I think it's crap."

He might as well have reached across the desk and slapped the tutor. "Excuse me?"

"I said I think it's crap. I suppose Strunk and White is okay if you're a technical writer—or if you're writing papers for classes, that kind of thing. But I can't see that it's got anything to do with writing fiction."

"You've never heard of having to learn the rules before you can break them?"

"Which rules? Whose rules?"

"The rules all the great writers followed."

"All of them? What about Henry James? H.P. Lovecraft? Samuel Delany? How would Strunk and White help them?"

"Samuel who?"

"Delany." When the tutor continued to stare at him, James added, "He writes science fiction."

"Which explains why I've never heard of him."

"What about James, then? Or haven't you heard of him?"

"Who reads Henry James, anymore?"

"I do. Enough people do to keep his books in print."

"Graduate students and professors."

"People who aren't afraid of a challenge."

"You like to argue, I see."

"I know what I like and I know why I do what I do."

Sean shook his head and pushed his fingers up under his glasses, squeezing the bridge of his nose. He said, "I don't think you're ready for the help I could give you. I think you need to see one of the other tutors."

"Sure, if that's what you think." James reclined in his chair.

"Here," the tutor said, holding out James's paper as if he were a butcher and it a poor cut of meat. "I'm referring you to Raymond: go out of this office, turn left, and take the stairs in front of you. You'll find his office at the foot of the stairs."

"There's more to this place?" James asked. "I didn't know Humanities had a sub-sub-basement, let alone, what? a sub-sub-sub-basement? What is this," gesturing at the small room with his paper, "an old fallout shelter?"

Sean shook his head. "I just work here."

"Okay," James said. "I guess I'll be on my way, then. Thanks for your time." He walked out of the office, turned left, and saw the stairway leading down. At the top of the stairs, he thought he heard Sean call something to him. He paused, listening, then returned to the office and leaned his head in the doorway. "I'm sorry, I didn't catch that."

The room was empty. The tutor had vanished, leaving the four white walls, the black desk and molded chairs, the clock on the wall hacking away at time. Above, the fluorescent lights buzzed and flickered, and James thought of a stage the moment after the actors have abandoned it. Sean must have slipped out while his back had been turned, shouting whatever he had shouted as he was climbing the stairs that had brought James here. Hard to believe the man could have departed with such speed and quiet; perhaps there was another door James wasn't aware of, some kind of hidden passage built into the walls when this place had been a fallout shelter. If it had served as a shelter: had he seen the old radiation signs upstairs? He couldn't remember. No matter: the tutor had left and he hadn't heard him; that was all. James turned again to the stairs to the sub-sub-sub-basement, wondering what Sean had said. It couldn't have been, "You'll wish for my time soon enough"; that didn't make any sense.

Maybe he shouldn't have given the poor guy such a hard time, James thought as his sneakers slapped concrete, the echoes chasing each other up and down the dim stairwell. It might have been easier—quicker, anyway—to nod, smile, be polite, listen to whatever pearls of idiocy the tutor had to cast before him, and then get the hell out of Dodge and go back to doing what he'd been doing. Damnit, though, this had been too much; it had been

the clichéd straw that snapped the camel's back. To be fair, Sean couldn't know that he was only the latest link in a chain stretching back through Privates to James's mother, who had met his declaration that he wanted to be a writer with, "That's nice, dear, but how are you going to make any money?" It was a chain whose first link had been forged when he was a high school freshman and had won the spring writing contest with a story about a family being pursued by the ghost of the grandfather they'd neglected to death. The story had earned him a check for ten dollars, publication in the school newspaper, and an extended lecture from his father one car-ride home during which his dad had told him that this was not the kind of thing he wanted to see James writing, this was not who he was, this Stephen King stuff. He couldn't stop James reading the stuff, though God only knew what he found in it, but he was not going to have his son writing it. James had sat in the passenger seat of the family car, a cavernous Ford LTD, feeling whatever modicum of triumph had seemed his evaporating under the withering heat of his father's dismissal.

He had felt that same heat sitting in Privates's class, which he had walked into on the first day of school with the relief of a man lost in the desert who finally stumbles into an oasis. At last, he would have an audience for the stories he had been discreetly writing for the last four years. At last, he would be surrounded by people who believed in writing, who didn't suspect it, view it as something best avoided by decent folk. But the oasis was a mirage, he had learned as the creative writing professor discussed and dismembered James's fiction to the other students, some of whom sought to jab their own barbed remarks. He had endured the slashing of his sentences, the dissection of his vocabulary, the evisceration of his plots. Privates ran his class like a stand up comedian conducting the Spanish Inquisition: he prowled the front of the room, James's latest story crumpled in one hand, the other locked into an accusatory point that stabbed at the pages in his hand, at James, at whoever wanted to join the bloodbath. The classroom lights shone on his extended forehead. Privates's voice was always angry; it bit off words and snarled phrases; so his analyses of James's work sounded more like rant than reason. James left class feeling as if every last inch of skin had been flayed from him.

All of which meant that, faced with the likes of Scan, James was not about to roll over and play dead. He wasn't going to prove anything to the tutor, but neither did he have to pretend that Sean's prejudices were anything more than that. No doubt, he should have reserved his remarks for Privates; in class, though, his tongue died in his mouth: he was unable to think of an answer to the professor until hours, sometimes days, after the initial carnage. And, a small, cowardly part of himself that he despised counseled, it was probably best not to make too much of an enemy of Privates: the Creative Writing program here at SUNY Huguenot was small, and the chances were better than even he was going to encounter the professor again, especially if he majored, or even minored, in Creative Writing. A panicked thought from that cowardly corner: would the tutor pass along James's assorted remarks to Privates? Privates was a big fan of Strunk and White: their slender beige volume occupied a privileged place on his course syllabus, and he invoked their names with the regularity of a devotee naming his god. James didn't know if the tutors were responsible for filing reports with the professors who referred students to them; he supposed so. Well, he hadn't said anything that damning, had he? ("I think it's crap.") Nothing that couldn't be retracted, at least.

God, these stairs went down deep. He was fairly sure he'd descended twice as far as he had to reach Sean's office. He couldn't say much for the lighting, either: if the school were going to ask students to use these facilities, it had better provide more than a single bulb set high in the wall every fifty feet or so; if it wanted to avoid a lawsuit, that was. He literally could not see the stairs in front of him, and had to rely on a guardrail whose surface flaked away beneath his skin.

There: his destination lay ahead of him, a rectangle of light across the sub-sub-sub-basement landing. Wondering if he truly had reached the Humanities building's lowest level, James glanced about, searching for another set of stairs leading still further into the earth. No: nothing he could see, anyway. From within the lighted doorway, a voice called, "Come in, Mr. Williamson."

If James could have spent one to two pages of single-spaced, ten-point type describing the first tutor, he could have consumed twice that dwelling on the second. He could see the sentences racing across his computer screen:

"Everything about this man came to a point: from the widow's peak shaping his crewcut into a wedge, to the narrow nose jutting out of his face like the prow of an icebreaker; from the tapered goatee sharpening his chin, to the long surgeon's fingers steepled under it; from the bat-like ears, to the prominent cheekbones threatening to tear through the skin stretched taut over them. His eyes—dark, liquid brown, protruding—were a pair of drill bits set in their sockets, and his gaze passed over you the way a barber might strop his straight razor. His mouth was a single dramatic slash cut into his flesh.

"He curved across his desk at you, this man, not in the tired slouch of an underpaid civil servant, but in a rigid, trembling arc, much the way a weapon, a knife, a scimitar, might point curving in your direction, the light playing on its polished sides. He gave the impression of having been carved whole from a block of something: from a single, giant tooth, you thought as you looked at him, from the tooth of a leviathan, of a monster from the lower depths. His features, fine as they were, were no more than scrimshaw tracing the surface of a great fang whose serrated edges were visible just out of the corners of your eyes. You felt the paint was cracking, beginning to peel off, and you felt equally that the man in front of you did not mind that in the least, would be only too happy to brush off the last colors of his disguise and stand for all to see in his awful whiteness." Which was to say nothing of the tutor's clothes, of the white, button-down shirt whose creases were so sharp they sliced the eye looking at them, of the black suspenders that bit into his shoulders, of the black plastic watch that blemished his left wrist.

The office, too, James thought as he gave his paper into the tutor's outstretched hand and seated himself in a molded plastic chair, would demand pages. Where Sean's had been bare beyond the point of minimalism, this one was decorated with a distinctive taste. Raymond's desk was an oaken monster that would have been more at home dominating the office of the university's president. Its top was crowded by a half dozen piles of paper, each one held in place by a slender steel spike onto which it had been jammed like an oversized moth. Behind the desk to either side was a file cabinet: the top drawer of the one to James's left was open, and was that a human skull sitting on top of the cabinet? Surely it was some

kind of medical model. Averting his gaze from its empty stare, James saw that the other file cabinet was crowned by a trio of mason jars filled with a thick, greenish-yellow liquid in which floated objects whose identities he was too far away to discern clearly. Plaques of all shapes and sizes crowded the office's walls, each one offering a different motto: "I AM ASKED IF UNIVERSITY CREATIVE WRITING PROGRAMS STIFLE YOUNG WRITERS. IN MY OPINION, THEY DO NOT STIFLE ENOUGH OF THEM." "PROSE IS ARCHITECTURE, NOT INTERIOR DECORATION." "SLAUGHTER YOUR DARLINGS." "OMIT NEEDLESS WORDS." "THE BAROQUE IS OVER." "CUT WHAT CAN BE CUT, THEN CUT AGAIN." He had heard, he reflected, most of these platitudes uttered by Privates. What is this, he thought amusedly, a conspiracy? Nestled amidst the various plaques were photographs of skulls, which appeared to have been cut from biology and medical textbooks and thumbtacked to the wall. To his back, a clock steadily struck off seconds; overhead, fluorescent lights hummed.

The tutor turned a page, drawing James's attention back to him. Raymond read hanging over the paper, his head jerking back and forth in minute motions that reminded James of a bird, a raven or crow, pecking at a carcass. He didn't take long to arrive at the end of James's story, and, when he did, he looked up across his desk, fighting the smirk twisting his lips, and said, "Well. Well well well." When James failed to reply, he went on, "What was the assignment?"

"To write about loss," James said.

"Loss, yes. And you wrote about a man whose heart is literally cut out and stolen from him by a mysterious figure. Would you say that's a fairly accurate summary?"

Hadn't Sean said something similar? "I'd say that's fairly accurate," James replied. Maybe there was a script the tutors were supposed to follow.

"And," Raymond flipped through James's paper, "judging from your professor's comments, he wasn't too taken with what you wrote."

Flushing, James said, "You could say that."

"Why do you suppose that is?"

"Because it isn't what he wants," James said after a moment. "It isn't what he thinks a story should be."

"I'm not sure I agree, but let's suppose I did. What do you think your professor thinks a story should be?"

James sighed and quoted, "'A story is a self-contained organic unity that offers the reader a brief snapshot of reality. Through indirection and understatement, it relates the process whereby its protagonist achieves a momentary insight, called an epiphany.' That was what he told us on the first day of class, and it's what he's told us every class since then."

"That's not a bad definition, is it?" Despite his sharp edges, the tutor, James thought, had the bright, wide-eyed manner and voice of a children's TV show host, plastically pleasant.

"It's not bad: it's just incomplete."

"How so?"

"There's more than one kind of story."

"Of course," Raymond said, "but what's wrong with learning the basics before moving on to other things?"

"They aren't the basics," James said. "The basics vary according to what you're trying to do."

"I'm not sure this is getting us anywhere: let's come back to it. Try this: what would you say is the point to what you've written?"

"What do you mean?"

"One could argue for what you've written as a form of allegory or symbolism: debased modes, to be sure, but possessed of a certain history. So I'm asking you: What is your system? What is it your story encodes, what worldview, what philosophy?"

"That isn't what I'm doing."

"I didn't think so." The tutor shook his head sadly. "If you can't justify your writing that way, then how about as entertainment, as escapism?"

"I'm not doing that, either."

"What are you doing, then?"

James shifted in his seat. "I'm trying to use non-realistic techniques to write about reality. It's like that Emily Dickinson poem, you know: 'Tell the truth —/ But tell it slant—/ Success in circuit lies.'"

"Most readers spend their days slogging through reality," Raymond said, "they don't read this kind of writing to be splattered with it."

"I don't accept that. I don't see why this fiction can't do everything any other kind of fiction can."

"It isn't suited for it," the tutor said. "Everything about a story like yours tells the reader that it should have nothing to do with the real world. It should be a doorway to another place, a kind of holiday for the mind."

"You're wrong."

The tutor blinked, and his eyes seemed to grow sharper, the plastic façade slip ever so slightly. "Oh?"

Nodding, James said, "Look at Samuel Delany. Look at Theodore Sturgeon. Look at Ramsey Campbell. There are any number of writers who prove that you can write this kind of stuff and still do serious, literary work."

"I'm not sure this is getting us anywhere," Raymond said, "let's come back to it. There's the matter of your style."

Crossing his arms, James said, "What about my style?"

"It's a bit much, isn't it? What's the word your professor used…? Ah, yes, 'murky.' I think that about hits the nail on the head, wouldn't you say? Of course not," Raymond added when James said nothing. "You disagree with such an assessment."

"I do."

"To be perfectly honest, I can't see how. Surely even you can't think your writing is clear. Listen to this line—where is it?—'Slowly, with the care with which you would withdraw a splinter from a wound, the trench-coated figure withdrew its blood-soaked hand from the gaping ruin that had been Carl's chest, its palm rich with the piece of throbbing meat that Carl saw with shock was his still-beating heart.'" The tutor ran his hand through his hair. "I don't know where to begin with such a sentence. It sprawls all over the place. You start with that adverb, and then you follow it with an

adverbial clause, and then you follow all that with an adjective. And the repetition! It takes a day and a half for the reader to reach the sentence's subject. Your writing meanders: it wants to stop and smell every single daisy on its way to its destination. 'Omit Needless Words': your professor has written that all over your paper, and I have to concur. I can't think of better advice for you.'

Frustration welled in James's chest. If he had not rolled over for Sean, he would be damned if he would for this guy. "It's challenging, yeah, but that's the idea."

"What's the point of such a challenge, though? It obstructs the reading of the story."

"Why can't it be part of reading the story? Why can't part of your experience be the language itself?'

"That isn't what writing is supposed to do: it's the medium, not the message."

"Why can't it be?"

Raymond's eyes narrowed, and James had the feeling the tutor's plastic pleasantness was in peril of slipping. "Perhaps a visual aid would be useful here," Raymond said, standing and reaching back to the cabinet on his right. His spidery fingers found the skull sitting there, closed on it, lifted and carried it forward to his desk, where he set it on top of James's story. "Do you know what this is?" he asked.

"A skull."

"Structure, Mr. Williamson, structure!" The tutor hissed the word, his fingers caressing the dull ivory hemisphere. "Without this, you are a puddle of organs. What good is a heart without a ribcage to hang it in, a brain without a skull to keep it safe?"

"But without those organs," James said, "your skeleton is so much calcium."

Raymond knocked on the bone. "This endures. Structure lasts; whereas flesh, ornament, decays, runs to rot and ruin. Decoration is distraction: you must learn that. It's self-indulgence, a trap. It's like stained glass. How many grand structures have I seen ruined by stained glass, by those windows

winking in the sunlight, drawing attention away from what is important, from the form, the architecture. Break the stained glass windows!" Raymond shouted, "Smash the gargoyles clustered on the ledges! Scrape off the paintings on the walls! Throw over the altar! Get rid of all of it! Clean it out! Strunk and White," he concluded, quieting, "it's all there for you in Strunk and White. Structure." Cradling the skull in both hands, he held it up before him like an imitation Hamlet, gazing lovingly at its stark grin. James half-expected him to quote the famous play. He did not expect the tutor to bring the skull in to his mouth, extending his tongue as he did so. Raymond's tongue was sharp, pink, and wet, and he ran it up the center of the skull, which he turned in his hands so that his tongue traversed it from brow to nape. Shocked, James sat watching, unable to offer a suitable response. When he was finished, the tutor returned the skull to its place on the file cabinet and slumped in his seat. His eyes were glazed. "Strunk and White," he said thickly.

"So I've heard," James said nervously.

"You'd do well to listen."

"I'm afraid I don't have much use for the little beige book."

"I can't say I'm surprised." Raymond smirked.

"Yeah, well, to each his own, right?"

"Wrong," Raymond said, his voice the rasp of a blade leaving its sheath. The mask had come loose.

"Excuse me?"

"There are consequences. There are penalties for refusing to follow the rules."

"I know: Did you see my grade?"

"Much worse things than grades lie in store for you."

"I'm sorry?"

"You will be. Yes, you most certainly will be. I have no doubt about that, nor should you. The things that are waiting for you… Sadly, I can't administer them. It's my duty to be reasonable, to try to persuade you to good sense through careful debate. What comes after I fail is left to the devices of the Editor."

"The Editor?"

"Yes. I believe I've done all I can for you. He will take it from here. It's almost a pity: you could have learned; I could have taught you. I could have helped you build the edifice of your future. I could have helped you construct something that would last.'

"I think I've had enough for tonight," James said. Suddenly, he was nervous, his leg bouncing up and down restlessly, his palms moist. It was the kind of unease he had last felt living at home, when confrontation with his father loomed and he sat in his room trying to read a book, unable to concentrate on the words for listening for the crunch of tires on gravel that would announce his dad's return from work and their imminent argument.

"Almost," Raymond said. He held out James's paper as a surgeon might hold out a freshly-excised tumor, all pretense at pleasantry long gone. "You'll find the Editor's office at the bottom of the stairs.'

Taking his paper, James said, "I thought this was the bottom of the stairs."

"Oh, no: you'll find these stairs go down quite far."

"Honestly, I don't think there's any point in my taking up anyone else's time," James repeated, rising from his chair and backing toward the door. "You think what you think, I think what I think, and there you have it, right?"

"You will see the Editor. He's waiting for you."

"I guess he gets an early night, then."

"He is waiting for you."

Without another word, James turned and walked out the door. The stairway was directly in front of him. When he went to step up, though, his foot swept through empty space and he had to grab the handrail to stop from toppling headlong down the stairs descending before him. He leapt back, mouth dry. What the hell was this? He looked around furiously. There were no other entrances or exits visible; this had to be the staircase that had brought him here. Now, there were only stairs sinking still deeper into the ground. Voice cracking, he shouted, "What the hell is this?"

"He's waiting for you," Raymond called back. A shape darkened the tutor's doorway; James turned to see what the man wanted.

What he saw sent him stumble-rushing headlong down the stairs so fast he was rounding the midway landing and pounding toward the Editor's office before he even could start thinking about what had bulked in the entrance. The light had been behind it, so James had had difficulty distinguishing much more than a silhouette, but that had been enough. The figure standing there had appeared at once an enormous, dark bird, with shining eyes and glistening plumage, and something else, a mountainous heap with quivering, jagged edges. Whatever it was, the sight of it had dashed James's mind to the floor like a china plate; his only coherent thought, What the hell?, repeating like a neon sign steadily blinking on and off. Instinct filled in the gap, sent him flying down the stairs. Were those footsteps behind him? The echo of his sneakers in the stairwell was too loud for him to tell. So focused was he on possible pursuit that the stairway's gradual turning to the right, transforming it into a spiral, registered only peripherally. James reached the foot of the stairs, saw the lighted doorway across from him, and, still in the grip of instinct, not thinking that he had been less than keen to be here just a few minutes prior, raced through it into the Editor's office.

It was too late for such thoughts in any event: the Editor was half standing from his chair and saying, "Come in, Mr. Williamson," one hand out for the paper James thrust into it reflexively. Chest heaving, blood pounding, James collapsed into a molded plastic chair. Not unkindly, the Editor said, "You don't sound too well."

"There was—upstairs—Raymond's office—Raymond," James panted.

"Ah, Raymond," the Editor said. "You saw him."

"Yes," James nodded, "Raymond." What had he seen?

The Editor turned his attention to James's paper. Thoughts swirling (a bird? a…?), James watched him. As had been the case with the tutors, there was material here for writing; a distant part of his mind recognized that. But any facility with language he possessed was gone, stunned if not smashed by the dark thing in the doorway, leaving him powerless to describe the man sitting across the desk from him. Where to begin? The Editor's tweed jacket? It looked slightly worn, but otherwise unremarkable. His white, button-down shirt? Similarly unremarkable. Bland as his clothes were, though, there was something about them that nagged the eye. They didn't

seem to fit particularly well, James decided after a minute. (A bird?) It wasn't so much that they were too big or too small, as that they appeared the wrong shape for the person wearing them. There were, James saw as he peered more closely, strange lumps pressing against the jacket's sleeves, its shoulders, as if the skin beneath were host to a forest of tumors. The stripes in the tweed helped to disguise the deformity, but once it became apparent to you, it was inescapable. Likewise, the Editor's face and hands were suspect. With a shock, James realized that the Editor had the same face as Privates: the high forehead, the watery eyes, the pug nose—but a Privates at least ten years younger, still riding the success of his lone single bestseller. His hair was black, shining. His skin was tanned a rich orange-brown, but it looked more like a layer of makeup that had been smeared onto his flesh than the result of hours spent under the Sun. This wasn't his professor, but the resemblance was sufficiently uncanny for James to look away, at the office.

A series of plain bookcases traversed the walls, each standing about three feet high; each with three shelves filled with row after row of the same narrow beige book: Strunk and White's Elements of Style, repeated over and over again. The tops of the bookcases were crowded with an assortment of letter openers, each in the form of a different kind of sword. Broadswords rested next to scimitars, sabers to cutlasses. Above the bookcases, framed photographs showed Roman arenas in various states of disrepair. Behind him, the click of the clock severed one second from the next; overhead, fluorescent lights buzzed.

"Well," said the Editor, looking up from James's story. "Well well well." When James did not respond, he proceeded, "What was the assignment?"

For the third time that night, James said, "To write about loss."

"Loss, yes. And you wrote about a man whose heart is literally cut out and stolen by a mysterious figure. Would you say that's an accurate summary?"

James stared at the Editor. Somewhere tonight, he thought, he had stepped through the proverbial looking glass, dropped down the rabbit hole. When had that happened? Had it been when he had sat down with Sean? Or had it been the moment he had opened the door to The Writing Scene and stepped across the threshold?

The Editor said, "I think that's a fair assessment of what you've written, and since I don't hear you disagreeing, I'll assume you do, too. I see no point in wasting my time or yours, Mr. Williamson. I don't know about you, but I am very busy, very very busy. I want to cut to the chase. You're here because other techniques have proved ineffectual. Shame and reason work well in many cases, but there are always a few recalcitrant souls who require more elaborate treatment. That's where I step in. I'm direct and I'm efficient. Do you speak French, Mr. Williamson?"

"French? No, not really: I took it in high school, but—"

"You would have no idea what I was talking about if I said, 'Il n'y a pas de hors-texte,' then, would you?"

"'There isn't—there'—could you repeat that?"

"'There is nothing outside the text,'" the Editor said. "Don't feel too bad, Mr. Williamson: the man who wrote those words has no idea of their true meaning, either. There is nothing outside the text. Nothing at all. Everything is textual; everything is made of words. Everything is language. Can you think a thought without language? Impossible."

"That isn't true: there are feelings."

"And the minute you feel whatever rarefied emotion you would offer as your example, you put a name to it. You may not call it 'anger' or 'joy'; you may call it, 'Way that my heart swells in my chest when I see the Sun rise over the ocean.' It doesn't matter: which ever way you turn, you are caught in language's web. Please don't waste my time with arguments," the Editor said, raising a hand as James went to speak. "If you can't accept this, it isn't my problem, any more so than if you couldn't accept gravity. Your refusal to believe the condition of reality does not make it any less real.

"If everything is textual, Mr. Williamson, then I'm sure you'll agree that the way we use language has tremendous consequence. It portends more than you, no doubt, have imagined; it portends more than you can imagine. If we wish to be clean and pure, then our language must be clean and pure. You cannot have one without the other. An orderly world requires an orderly language. Such things as metaphor, simile, synecdoche, metonymy, bring disorder; even a comparison so seemingly simple as, 'My love is like a red, red rose,' spawns meanings that run off in all directions. It is for this reason

that such language is to be abhorred. It cannot be excised entirely, dream though I do of such an accomplishment, but it can be discouraged, diminished, contained. And writing that makes use of these same figures at length, writing such as this," the Editor gestured at James's story, "that wallows in it, also can be discouraged, diminished, contained. We cannot eradicate what you do, Mr. Williamson, but we can keep it in a safe place.

"For such an arrangement to succeed, however, both parties must agree to it. Both sides must play by the same rules. You are not playing by the rules, my young friend, and that is causing problems. Scratch that: it could cause problems, if we let it proceed too far. We've made that mistake in the past, not intervening until it was too late, and what never should have seen the light of day was being reviewed on the front page of The New York Times Book Review. It takes a long time to repair that kind of damage, years and sometimes decades to corral such works. It was for this reason that we began our move into the university system, in an effort to nip future problems in the bud, to instruct you and your fellows in the rules of the game while there was still time for them to be effective."

Shaking his head, James said, "You're losing me. What are you saying, that you're some kind of government agency? Are you connected to the NEA?"

The Editor laughed, the sound of a guillotine dropping. "No, Mr. Williamson, we're a bit more than a government agency, quite a bit more, if I may say so; though we have had some spectacular successes with the NEA. Our role is more prestigious than mere government. We are in the service of They Who Walk Between; our Masters swim the—well, it's all rather much for you to comprehend, really. We are the vassals of those forces that seek order, that long for cleanliness. We serve those who seek the straight line, the unencumbered way, the direct path. We do our part to make of this place a more suitable abode for them; they, in turn, bestow on us such morsels of their power as we can accept."

James had the feeling that he wasn't hearing the Editor's words completely, that there was a critical component to them that was eluding him. He knew what he thought the tanned man across from him was saying, but that couldn't be right. His mind still must be piecing itself together from whatever it was he had seen upstairs. (A bird? A…?) Trying not to sound as stupid as he felt, he asked, "So, it's an international thing? You're part of a

multinational corporation? And you're running a tutoring center at a small college in upstate New York?" His voice could not disguise his skepticism.

"As of this moment, we are affiliated with thirty-four colleges and universities in schools ranging up and down the country. We have plans to expand. As for our involvement in such mundane places as the State University of New York at Huguenot: think, Mr. Williamson, think! Why is it that, when a dictator seizes power, the first thing he does is to order all the poets lined up and shot? Why do you suppose that is? Because there's no surer shot than a poet.? Of course not. They do so because they understand the power that is writing. Your ancestors believed words were magic, and they were right. If everything is textual, then each and every word is a component of reality, and collections of them have the ability to shape existence."

"Why not follow those dictators' leads, then, and have all the writers executed?" James asked. "For the sake of argument."

"Because such actions always and inevitably have the opposite effect. Want to make a novel a bestseller overnight? Assassinate its author. Want to put a poem on the lips of every man, woman, and child for two hundred miles around? Cut the poet's throat. Much as we might like to hang everyone who's ever written so much as a grocery list up by the thumbs and eviscerate him, I'm afraid more subtle means are required to bring the magic that is language under control."

"Shame and reason?"

"Very good, Mr. Williamson, very good."

"Although Raymond wasn't very reasonable, not really." (What had he seen?)

"The appearance of reason is all that is required," the Editor said. "Indeed, it's more than sufficient for the majority. Cloak your opinion in the tone of rationality and it will be accepted."

James wondered if he were having a breakdown, if the entire night had been an extended and elaborate hallucination. He said, "I still don't understand, I guess. You've just finished telling me how powerful I am: what makes you think that I'm going to change my writing to suit you, or anyone else, for that matter?"

"You could be powerful," the Editor corrected. "Potential does not equal being. As of this moment, you're less than nobody. The stream of pages that pours from your word processor could dry up tomorrow and never be missed. Of course, we don't want the situation to come to that. You are of far more use to us alive than… anything else. There is a place for you and what you do; I simply intend to help you find it and to keep within its borders. My Masters, you see, have their existence only partially in this material world. Indeed, the greater part of their essence lives, moves, and has its being at a level more abstract than you can conceive. On their plane, they move with the majesty of great whales in the ocean. They are… for them to descend to this place," the Editor waved his hand, "requires that, on that abstract, intangible level, conditions be as calm, as orderly, as possible. It is, I suppose, one of their few liabilities, their susceptibility to the turbulence of human thought. The more stilled the mass of such thoughts, the more of themselves my Masters can bring to it. And the more of my Masters here, the more they can help us in our quest to bring order to this filthy ball of muck. This is why we insist that everything be in its place. We cannot remove the human need for entertainment, but we have discovered that we don't need to. We can do something better: we can channel it into set forms, into configurations familiar and comfortable. We can take a dangerous stimulant, and make of it a narcotic.

"Needless to say, I recognize that a certain amount of intimidation and force will be required to achieve my stated goal. But that is the part I play."

"Wait," James said, holding up his hands as if to prevent the Editor from lunging at him, "what do you mean by 'intimidation and force'?"

"I mean what I say and I say what I mean," the Editor replied. He was holding a sheaf of papers in his right hand, not James's story but an assortment of yellow legal pages and typed sheets, all of them covered with black handwriting. James had not seen him reach for them; it was as if they had appeared in his hand. "Everything is text, Mr. Williamson: What makes you think you're any different? What makes you believe you're anything more than, say, a character in a story written by a balding Ph.D. candidate who should be working on his dissertation?"

For a reason he could not name, the sight of the various pages fluttering in the Editor's orange-brown hand filled James with a dread that reached from

the pit of his stomach to the back of his throat. Absurd, he knew, but he felt the urge to leap out of his chair and make a grab for them. Instead, he attempted a grin and said, "This is—"

"This is the way of the world," the Editor said. With his left hand, he selected a letter opener from the bookcase to his left. It was a replica of a Roman short sword, a gladius. As he watched, the Editor placed the flock of pages onto his desk and, in a smooth, fluid arc, drove the letter opener through the center of them.

Pain exploded in James's chest, slamming him back in his chair. It felt as if a foot and a half of sharpened steel had been rammed through his sternum, impaling his heart. For a frozen moment, James could not speak, could not breathe, and then he was screaming. Never had he felt anything like this: the closest he had come was an inflamed appendix that had required emergency surgery, and what he had remembered as a mountain of suffering was dwarfed by this, a foothill beside the Everest of the hurt piercing him. Tears flooded his face; his nose streamed; he screamed. He could not think: he was only a body curled around the red agony that had replaced his heart.

"Do you feel that?" the Editor asked, leaning back in his chair, his eyes roaming from the letter opener jammed into his desk to James writhing in his chair back to the letter opener. "Of course you do. What I should ask is, Do you understand what is happening to you? Do you know who is doing this to you?" As James continued screaming, the Editor shouted, "Mr. Williamson, this will go much more smoothly and quickly if you will play your part. I ask you again, DO YOU KNOW WHO IS DOING THIS TO YOU?"

James stopped screaming. Through clenched teeth, he breathed, "You are."

"Me? Oh no, Mr. Williamson, no no no. I don't have anything to do with this. You are doing this to yourself."

"I am?"

"Why yes, of course, yes you are. It's been you who have been so stubborn, you who have refused to take heed of the cautions of shame and reason. You have brought us to this impasse; you have necessitated this drastic action."

Unable to think of a reply, James whimpered, a fresh wave of tears spilling down his cheeks.

"And if you are responsible for what is happening to you, then who do you think can stop it? Come on: you're dallying."

"Me," James gasped, "I can make it stop."

"Very good, although I daresay the answer was a bit obvious. Oh well, even the easy questions need answering. Yes, it's you, Mr. Williamson, James: it's you who can make this better or," the Editor paused, "worse. Do you want to know what you have to do?"

James nodded.

"Speak up, Mr. Williamson: I can't hear your head rattle."

"Yes," James managed.

"Good. There are a number of solutions to your dilemma. The first and most obvious is that you learn your place and accept it. Enough of this nonsense you've been passing off on your professor: from now on, you do what he wants you to. Embrace your role as a tyro. I realize that you may find yourself constitutionally incapable of abandoning your beloved métier, the fantastic. We can accommodate that: there is always a place for escapism. It must be escapism, however; it should fit nicely into that category. No round pegs in square holes. Whatever you decide to write, clean up your language; it's all there for you in Strunk and White.

"Should neither of these options prove acceptable, for one reason or another, there are still more choices open to us. You can abandon fiction for nonfiction, for history, say. Feed the public's desire for trivia. Write a nice biography. No one takes the past seriously. There is also silence. You may choose to lay down the pen, to step back from the keyboard. If anyone asks why, you can appeal to the morality of silence; you'd be amazed at how successful we've been at selling that one.

"If none of these will do, then I'm afraid the decision will default back to us. And our choice, while effective, will be less than pleasant. Do you understand?"

"Yes," James whispered.

"I fear our little demonstration is going to have to continue for a bit longer. I understand, you see, that, once you have left my office and returned to the relative safety of your dorm room, you may find a way to convince yourself that none of this happened, that it was all a bad dream. We can't have that, Mr. Williamson, can wet"

"I'll remember," James said, "I'll remember I swear I'll remember I promise."

"Of course you do. Who wouldn't, in your situation? Such pledges aren't enough, I fear. There needs to be a memory sufficiently intense and unpleasant to give your oaths the requisite foundation."

"No," James pleaded, "no come on please."

"Don't worry," the Editor said, and pulled the letter opener out of the manuscript.

Instantly, the searing agony in James's chest was gone, so completely it might never have been there. He could feel his heart pounding, filling the space that had been a wound the moment before. Relief coursed through him; he could breathe again. His body, which had been contracted around the pain, relaxed all at once, as if he had been submerged in a warm bath. Eyes closed, he slumped back in his chair.

"Your attention, please, Mr. Williamson," the Editor said. "I want you to see this."

Although he would have been blissfully content to remain as he was for the next week or so, a jolt of fear surged up James's spine, opening his eyes and straightening him in his seat. The Editor, he saw, was holding the undersized gladius point down over the manuscript. The lower half of the The manuscript on the desk was marked by the same viscous substance, which pooled at the spot where the letter opener had stabbed it. The Editor said, "All is text, Mr. Williamson. At this moment, we have the text. I want you to remember that.'

"You have the text," James repeated, "yes."

"It's quite the opportunity you're being given, I hope you realize. Play your proper role, and you will number among those helping the cause of order. Who knows? Your influence could be profound. Perhaps, at some point,

your involvement in our struggle might become more… direct. You are valuable to us, Mr. Williamson; you are worth so much more to us healthy and writing than otherwise. You've already demonstrated such spirit tonight, spirit that only needs to be given the proper outlet. It would be a terrible shame to see you go to waste. However—" the Editor raised the letter opener. James had sufficient time to see the bloody tip of the undersized sword poised over the bloody pages and know what was waiting to descend on him; he had sufficient time to look closely into the Editor's eyes and see that his pupils were the elongated pupils of a goat's eyes; he had sufficient time to think, It's a mask; he's wearing a mask and gloves. Then the letter opener drove into the manuscript with a thunk.

It was as if he had been stabbed in the neck, from his Adam's apple through to his spine. Gagging, he convulsed in his chair, flopping out of it and onto the floor. Dimly, he felt his knee, his head strike concrete. His hands clutched at his throat, trying to tear it free of what wasn't there. He heard a pop as the Editor wrenched the letter opener from the desk, and in the sudden absence of pain sucked in great whoops of air. Then another thunk, and his right leg felt as if it had been cut clean to the bone. James howled, grabbing at his thigh even as a second pop heralded the end of that hurt and a third thunk brought fireworks of agony bursting deep in his gut. His back; his side: he writhed as the Editor lanced him like a sadistic child plunging a pin into a hapless insect. The letter opener thunked through the manuscript with mechanical rhythm, and with each blow a new part of James's body screamed with abuse: his face; his foot; his eye; his groin; his knee. With each stab, he could feel himself tearing, as if he were so much paper yielding to the Editor's blows. His kidney flared nova-bright, and he was paper; he felt himself part before the blade the way a sheet of heavy-bond typing paper would. Thunk. He was paper. Thunk. He was paper. Thunk. Paper.

"I think that should do," the Editor said, and, for the final time, the pain went away. James lay on the floor, trembling, his voice screamed out. He had lost count of the number of times he had heard metal bite into wood: a dozen? twice that? more? The Editor loomed above. James looked up and saw his head floating overhead like a helium balloon. It did not seem to be attached to a body. "Get up," the head said, and James obeyed, climbing up

on legs that wobbled like a comedian's. When he stood, he saw that the Editor's head had rejoined his body. The Editor's face, shirt, and coat were splattered with scarlet spray. The manuscript lay on the desk before him, ragged with holes, each one oozing blood. The letter opener lay to one side of it, washed in red to the hilt. "Here endeth the lesson," the Editor said pleasantly. "You understand what is required of you?"

James croaked, "Yes."

"Good. I could ask you to repeat everything I told you, but that panicked look is its own reward. I trust we won't see you again, Mr. Williamson."

"No," James said, "you won't."

"Glad to hear it. You can see yourself out. There is a door to the right as you leave this office: take it: it's a bit of a short cut. That's just between us, though."

"Yes," James said.

"And," the Editor held out his hand, and he was holding James's story, the way a hunter might hold the carcass of his latest kill, his bloody fingers smearing its white pages.

James stared at it.

"What would you like me to do with this?"

James shook his head.

"As I told you before, Mr. Williamson, I cannot hear your head rattle. You'll have to speak up."

"Do what you want," James finally said. "I don't care."

"Very well," the Editor said, and let the story fall flapping into the garbage can beside his desk. "That's good riddance to bad rubbish, wouldn't you say?"

"Yes," James said.

"Good. Now get out, boy, and don't let me see your face a second time."

Leaving the office on legs still shaking, James saw the door the Editor had mentioned to his right. He heaved it open, and stepped out into the quad in front of the Humanities building. Given the number of stairs he had descended, he should have felt shocked, he knew, but after the night's other

marvels and terrors, this one seemed so much cheap parlor magic. A mob of students swelled past him on its way to town and the alcoholic pleasures of Pete's Corner Pub, their mingled shouts and laughter crowding the air. He watched them pass. The night air was cool on his skin, which continued to tingle. Above, a few stars competed in vain with a half-moon tilted to one side, like a silver cup pouring down radiance. As he stood there, feeling time expand, hearing the faint honks of distant car horns, James felt something loosen in his chest. He tried to arrest it, but was too tired to resist. The thing in his chest gave, and he was sitting on the ground, sobbing tears he had not believed he had left in him. Passersby sped up as they neared him. One girl with red hair and a long, fur-trimmed coat stopped to bend over and ask him if he was all right; he waved her on. Eventually, he rose and staggered to his dorm room on legs made numb from sitting for so long.

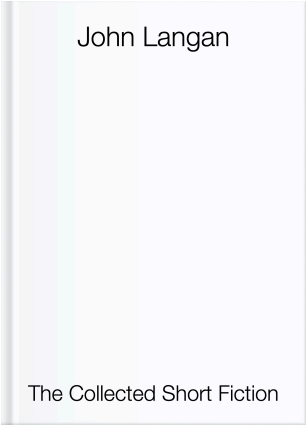
The next day, James went to his advisor and made the necessary arrangements to drop Creative Writing I. Asked for his reason, he explained that he was doing poorly in the class, on the verge of failing, and had decided that Creative Writing wasn't for him. When his advisor asked him what was for him, James answered, Economics. His advisor congratulated him on his sensible choice. Although James had not told his parents of his hope of majoring in Creative Writing, they were happy to learn of his decision to pursue Economics.

Midway through the following semester, however, during a lecture in Intro to Economics on the role of corporations in capitalism, James noticed his pen beginning to write sentences in the margins of his notebook. The sentences began, "Once upon a time," and, "To say the man was fat," and, "Everything about this man came to a point." Realizing what he was doing, he scribbled out the sentences frantically, his heart knocking. But after a day passed with no reprisals—a day James spent ceaselessly glancing from side to side, starting at loud noises, feeling the skin between his shoulder blades tingle as if someone were targeting a rifle on it—and then another, and finally a third, he couldn't help himself: he wrote a short short story on the inside back page of his Biology notebook while he should have been learning cell mitosis. It was followed by a longer piece in the same notebook two classes later, and another short short story in his Art History

notebook that emerged during an extended slide lecture on eighteenth-century English landscape painters. He described the inhabitants of the tutoring center at great length, inventing weaknesses for them, liabilities. All was text, the Editor had said, what was written wove the world. Exactly how it did so James was unsure. Did Sean feel his suit of skin loosen ever so slightly? Did Raymond notice more and more people looking at him, their expressions confused, as if they had momentarily glimpsed something terrible? Did the Editor notice that the dimensions of his office seemed to be changing, that it appeared to be shrinking around him? Impossible to say; though he suspected that, eventually, somehow, his words would have to find print.

He wrote every day, quickly, hunched over his desk, one eye open to everyone and everything around him.

Episode Seven: Last Stand Against the Pack in the Kingdom of Purple Flowers



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"There's a whole lot of hate left on this world, Spiderman."
—Samuel R. Delany, *The Einstein Intersection*

"Come On Down, Make the Stand."
—The Alarm, "The Stand"

"He was not assaulted by a roving pack of feral dogs."
—Dale Bailey, "The End of the World As We Know It"

After three days and nights on the run—

—during which they slept in thirty-, sixty-, and ninety-minute snatches, in the backs of large cars and SUVs, in a hotel lobby, in a sporting goods store at one end of a mall—

—they managed to pull ahead of the Pack—

—who had been too close from the start and drawn closer than that, despite Wayne's traps, all of which were clever and a few ingenious and the least of which thinned the Pack by two or three; until Wayne succeeded in luring them onto the walkway between the foodcourt and the mall's front entrance, where he detonated something that not only dropped the floor out from beneath the Pack, but brought the roof down, too, raining shards of glass like so many economy-sized guillotines—Jackie had wanted to stay and finish the survivors, but Wayne had declared it was still too dangerous and hauled her out the door—

—cross the Bridge—

—too congested with cars for them to take the Jeep Cherokee Wayne had navigated up the surprisingly empty stretch of Route 9 between the mall and the Mid-Hudson Bridge, which had made them debate the pros and cons of continuing north along this side of the Hudson until they reached the next bridge, which might be clear or might not (for once, Wayne couldn't make up his mind), until Jackie insisted they might as well cross here as cross anywhere: there would be plenty of cars on the other side, and if they didn't do something, they were going to squander their lead and face the Pack on *their* terms (which, aside from that first, terrible introduction, they'd succeeded in avoiding)—so they abandoned the Jeep, shouldered the backpacks, heavy as ever (so much for having rested), and (the Bridge shifting underfoot in the wind that hummed through its cables like a choir warming up) wound their way through a labyrinth of vehicles jammed, it seemed, into every possible configuration, their interiors choked with the oversized, thick-stemmed purple flowers Jackie and Wayne had found inside the vast majority of vehicles they'd encountered thus far, wound around steering wheels, gearshifts, and pedals (the windows talced with violet pollen), which made operating the cars a problem they had neither tools nor time to solve—there was a pickup whose cab was empty, but it was boxed against the railing by a trio of smaller cars, as if they'd brought it to bay there—

—set up camp on the other shore—

—on a ledge overlooking the spot where the Bridge slotted into the steep hills on the western shore of the Hudson—Wayne had noticed the shelf of rock as they followed the road up and to the right, past another cluster of cars full of purple flowers, pointing it out to Jackie—when they reached a place where the ledge was accessible from the road, up a steep path blocked by a gate Wayne was certain he could open, he had steered them towards it (even though Jackie's legs trembled at the prospect of more and harder climbing), urging her on, murmuring encouragements, praise, until they had gained the top of the path and Wayne had sprung the lock on the gate, let them through, and snapped the lock closed again behind them—Jackie had followed him as he picked his way across the rocks littering the shelf; no more than fifteen feet at its widest, she guesstimated; the Bridge returning

to view, and then Wayne had held up his hand as if he were some kind of native guide signaling the rest of the safari and said that this would do—

—and were preparing an ambush—

—Wayne starting back along the ledge almost as soon as they'd shucked their backpacks, taking with him only the bulky black canvas bag that Jackie thought of sometimes as his bag of tricks and sometimes as his utility belt, and one of the pistols, leaving the other guns with her: the rifle whose name she couldn't remember but which Wayne had been very excited to find in the sporting goods store, and the two remaining pistols, one of which had come from Wayne's father's safe, the other from an empty police cruiser —"You don't have to cover me," he'd said, "but pay attention," and she had, sitting with her bag propped against the backpacks, the rifle resting against the dome of her belly, as Wayne retraced their route down the hill to the Bridge and then out onto it, to set up some trap that had occurred to him, maybe two if there were time, till he was lost to view, obscured by the lean of the hill opposite her.

Jackie—

—Jacqueline Marie DiSalvo: twenty years old; five foot six, tall as her (most likely dead) father; she didn't know how many pounds anymore, since stepping on scales hadn't been at the top of her list of priorities for some time, now; her hair dark brown, long enough not to look short; her eyes brown, as well; her features carefully proportioned, (once, her [dead] father had described them to her as prim, which she hadn't been sure how to take); her skin less tanned than she would have expected, considering all the time they'd spent outdoors this past month: much of it at night, true, and there had been almost a solid week of rain in the middle of it, but still; wearing an extra-large men's white cotton t-shirt, gray sweatpants, white cotton athletic socks, and knock-off Birkenstocks that were comfortable but growing too tight: again, shoe shopping not a priority when you were running (or waddling, in her case) for your life—five weeks ago, she had been thirty-five days less pregnant, six and a half instead of nearly eight months "along" (her [most likely dead] doctor's favorite euphemism for pregnancy, as if carrying a child were an exotic vacation): a difference that meant, practically speaking, a smaller stomach, smaller breasts, smaller everything; smaller her, who didn't tire quite so quickly; who didn't feel so

out of breath all the time; who didn't sleep well but better than lately, when comfort had taken the last train out; who didn't need to stop to pee all the time, while Wayne stood guard, his gun out, his eyes sweeping whatever landscape they were in for the inevitable (re)appearance of the Pack—

—sat waiting for Wayne—

—Wayne Anthony Miller: twenty years old, two days younger than Jackie, in fact: she born on the third of July, he the fifth; six foot three; maybe one hundred and seventy pounds, not yet grown out of adolescent gangliness (his [most likely dead] mother's term, which he'd overheard her use at a New Year's party and which he'd confessed to Jackie left him feeling betrayed in some fundamental way); his hands and feet large, hung from long, skinny arms and legs that attached to a long, skinny torso; his hair grown long, a light brown that had been blond until his teens, framing a broad, square face with a small nose, narrow eyes, and generous mouth; he was wearing the same pair of jeans that had seen him through the last month, and which were little worse for wear (what an ad campaign: "Levi's: We'll Get You Through the End of Civilization: Rated Number One in Post-Apocalyptic Scenarios"), with a red plaid shirt open over a gray t-shirt emblazoned with Batman's black bat emblem, and Doc Marten's—five weeks ago, he had been working at the Barnes and Noble just south of the Bridge on the other side of the river and spending more of each paycheck than he should have at the comic book store in the plaza, there; his Associates Degree in Liberal Arts from Dutchess County Community College completed the previous semester; his future, which revolved around dreams of writing one of the Batman titles, still, as he liked to put it, a work-in-progress (this back when the future had extended further forward than the next twelve hours, and been somewhat more complex, yet also somewhat simpler, than trying to locate food and defensible shelter).

The sun was hot—

—roasting was a better word for it; although there was a substantial breeze blowing up from the river—Jackie supposed that the exposed rock around her, a grayish, sharp stuff that she should have been able to name but whose identity apparently lay in that part of her memory marked "No Longer Useful," amplified the heat, which wasn't completely oppressive (soon, it would be, she would be panting like a dog with it, most likely feel the urge

to strip down to her underwear, but for the moment it radiated through her pleasantly).

Later—

—the better part of two hours; what had he been doing out there?—

—Wayne returned—

—waving to her as he walked off the Bridge; she waved back—

—long enough to pick up some rope—

—digging it out of his backpack, a hefty coil that looked like something a mountain climber might use and that he had been happy to find in a hardware store two weeks ago, which Jackie hadn't understood, since the rope looked pretty heavy and she didn't see the point in either of them taking on any more weight than was absolutely necessary—already, Wayne was carrying more than his fair share to compensate for her; she didn't want him exhausting himself because of an inability to pass on everything that might prove useful someday—she hadn't said anything out loud, though, and the addition of the rope seemed to have made no significant difference to him—

—and return to the Bridge—

—where he strung the rope across the road, running it back and forth and back and forth between a pair of the Bridge's support cables, weaving a kind of improvised web that Jackie thought would slow down the weakest members of the Pack for about half a second, and that the leader and its (hers? his?) companions would be through in no time at all.

When he was done with his final trap—

—which didn't look any more impressive once it was finished than it had when Jackie had realized what it was; although there was more of it than she had expected, a dozen, maybe fifteen strands that Wayne had layered according to a design she couldn't discern, so that some strands ran a foot or more behind the others—she hadn't exactly dozed while he'd constructed it: she'd kept her eyes open throughout the process, but her mind had wandered, as it had so often in the last day and a half, to the baby, which had gone from what she referred to as its daily calisthenics to complete stillness, not moving at all that she could feel (and, at this stage, she could

feel a lot) for roughly thirty-six hours, now, which might have been entirely normal for all she knew: there was a rather dramatic lack of obstetricians in these parts (ha ha) and while Wayne knew a surprising amount about all sorts of things, his expertise tended towards the ultraviolent and not so much the whole miracle-of-life end of the spectrum—the best he could do was hear her concerns, shrug, and tell her not to worry about it, advice she'd already given herself and that was growing impossible to follow—she could feel panic gathering inside her, coalescing into a storm that would wash her away in a torrent of tears and screaming, because the child inside her was dead, she was carrying a dead baby—all right, to be honest, her mind hadn't wandered so much as gone directly to her anxiety and watched it growing—the point was, she wasn't sure if Wayne had rigged his web with any of the explosives (proper and improvised) that stuffed his bag of tricks, or if he had other plans for his oversized Cat's Cradle—

—he came back—

—and a good thing, too, because the sun had dipped behind the hill to her back, and though the sky overhead was still blue, it was that darker blue that would spend the next couple of hours shading steadily darker, into that indigo that a month of looking up at the night sky had shown her was the actual color against which the stars shone, and while the Pack had more than proved their ability to appear at any time of day, there was no doubting they preferred to move after the sun was down, and although Jackie had trained with the pistols, had opened up on one of the Pack at terrifyingly close range (it had scampered off, unhurt), she'd had a single lesson with the rifle (whose name was on the tip of her mind) with it unloaded, and had no faith in her ability to get off more than a single shot, if that, which was not saying anything about her ability to kill or even hit her target, so when Wayne tied the final knot in his rope barrier and started up the road, relief suffused her—

—and built a fire—

—using wood he collected from the trees along the path up to the ledge, a heavy armload that he arranged into a larger fire than she would have thought wise, an almost inexplicable lapse of Wayne's part—unless he wanted to be visible; if so, it was a new strategy for him: his previous traps had depended on misdirection, on leading the Pack into thinking the two of

them were someplace they were safely away from, which had become increasingly difficult as the Pack adapted to Wayne's tactics—frankly, Jackie had been shocked that the mall trap had succeeded as well as it had, because it had been so obvious, as obvious as any of his early efforts, so much so that the Pack must have assumed (if you could apply such a word to them; though they evidently had some process of cognition) it couldn't possibly be a set-up, and so had walked right into the middle of it—strictly speaking, there was no need for a fire, not yet, heat poured up from the ledge and would do so well into the night, while the Bridge's lights, a row of flame-shaped bulbs tracing the arc of each of the suspension cables, had blinked on as the daylight ebbed (one of those intermittent events that indexed the random status of what she already was referring to herself as the Old World's machineries), their bright glow traversing the spectrum from blue to red and back down to blue again, their light sufficient for Jackie to read her battered copy of *What to Expect When You're Expecting* if she wanted to (she didn't; she felt vaguely guilty about it, but she was too tired [and—tell the truth—afraid of what the book might tell her about the baby's stillness])—when you came right down to it, the fire was a beacon and a goad, Wayne's way of thumbing his nose at whatever members of the Pack might have survived the mall and guiding them across the Bridge—as she reclined against her backpack and accepted the peanut butter bagel Wayne passed her, Jackie thought, *This really is it, our last stand; after four weeks, we're making our stand*.

They ate dinner in silence—

—the way they did practically everything in silence, the last week or so—formerly, Wayne had been a talker of epic proportions, the kind of person you don't start a conversation with unless you've got, say, three days to spare, which Jackie had found mostly charming, because a lot of what he had to say was funny and interesting, and if she rolled her eyes, it was only when he started talking about whatever comic book he was currently infatuated with, which he could and would do in microscopic, mind-numbing detail—comics never had interested her, the secret exploits of men playing dress-up in what was essentially a consequence-free arena just hadn't appealed; although the length and depth of description and analysis Wayne lavished on them prompted her to second-guess herself once in a

while; now, she wished she had read some of the titles Wayne had rhapsodized about (*The Dark Knight Returns* and *Batman: Year One* [but not *The Dark Knight Strikes Again*, that was so much overpriced crap] and *The Sandman* and *Johnny the Homicidal Maniac* [whose title she wished she found funnier]) or at least paid better attention to his lectures on them, because they might have helped her understand what had happened to Wayne in the last month, since the bottom had dropped out of the world, the least manifestation of which was the drying up of the torrent of words that poured from his mouth, and the most dramatic example of which was… was crazy—

—then cleaned the guns—

—one at a time, Wayne stripping each of the pistols in turn while Jackie trained the rifle on the rope barrier, then the rifle as Jackie aimed the policeman's automatic—she could have broken each of the weapons down, cleaned and greased them, herself: Wayne had insisted she learn in case anything happened to him (which was a joke: did he really imagine that, at this stage, big and awkward as she was, she'd get anywhere without him? it was almost funny: the hugely pregnant woman, a smoking gun in either hand, fighting off the Pack), but the thick smell of the grease nauseated her, so she stood (reclined, actually) guard and let Wayne do things the way he not-so-secretly wanted to—

—and settled down for the night—

—to wait and sleep, him taking the first watch, her the second—after she'd unrolled her sleeping bag and used her feet to push off her sandals, she looked at Wayne, sitting on the other side of the fire (to which he'd added even more wood, keeping it hot and bright), and asked, "When will they be here?" to which Wayne answered, "Hard to tell. If we're lucky, late morning, early afternoon," which surprised her: ambush or not, last stand or not, she would have expected that, if the Pack hadn't put in an appearance by first light, maybe a little later, the two of them would abandon their position, which, for all its advantages in terms of height ("Control the high ground": how often had Wayne repeated that?) was a dead-end: if the Pack made it through whatever Wayne had prepared for them on the Bridge, not to mention his improvised web, and surged up the road till they reached the path to the ledge, she and Wayne would be trapped (violating another of his

mantras, "Always have a way out"); better, she thought, to keep their options open and retreat, trust Wayne's ingenuity to thin the Pack further—all of which she said to him, and none of which made a difference: "This is our best chance," he said, and while she argued, appealing to her mantra, "He who fights and runs away, lives to fight another day," Wayne was unmovable, and anyway her eyelids were sliding down, so she abandoned her argument until daylight and slid into her sleeping bag.

Jackie's sleep was light, troubled—

—because sleeping soundly was impossible at this stage of pregnancy; not on a rock shelf in a sleeping bag, at least; and because her dreams were vivid and disturbing; no surprise, so *What to Expect* assured her: pregnant women were subject to all kinds of anxiety dreams, a tendency compounded on her part by the last month's events, the long struggle to keep on the move and ahead of the Pack, which had given her unconscious a whole new vocabulary of unease and terror—

[—she was on that stretch of Route 9 where all the cars; two, three dozen; had come to a halt pretty much simultaneously, with the exception of a black SUV that had crumpled the trunk of the red sedan in front of it—she and Wayne peering through the cars' windows at their interiors, every one crowded by purple flowers, anywhere from one to four per vehicle, stalks thick and twisting as snakes, blossoms the size of sunflowers, a kind of plant she'd never seen, and while she was no expert, botany was a hobby—each flower an accumulation of overlapping petals, vaguely roselike except that each petal was four to six inches long, edges ragged, almost serrated, and a uniform eggplant hue; the flowers' centers obscured by clusters of closed petals that suggested mouths pursed for a kiss, an effect she found sufficiently unsettling to drop her eyes to the stems, parsley-green, woody, covered in coarse hairs, fan-shaped leaves tiny, almost vestigial—Jackie had studied the plants, looped around steering wheels, gearshifts, headrests, door handles, pedals, one another, through windows dusted with violet pollen, each car a separate terrarium, thinking that none of this made any sense: there was no way for this size of plant to survive in this kind of environment, deprived, as far as she could see, of food and water—before Wayne could stop her, she had grabbed the door handle of the car she was standing next to so she could open it and take a cutting from the flower

whose blossom pressed against the window like a child's face peering out; but the stem held the door closed with surprising force, so that the best she could manage was opening the door a crack, not enough to reach the plant, just sufficient for a small cloud of pollen to puff out—then Wayne was there, pulling her back from the car onto the shoulder, though not before she'd inhaled some of the pollen, filling her nose with the astringent smell of lavender, which lingered for the rest of the day despite the fit of violent sneezing it precipitated—she had been annoyed at Wayne, not only for being so patronizing, but for reminding her that there wasn't much point in her taking a cutting—what was she going to do with it? she could put it under a microscope if they could find one, and then what? she was a college junior majoring in Biology and minoring in Psych: about the best she'd be able to do if she could study a slide of a purple flower would be to identify it as a plant—it wasn't as if she'd be able to offer any insight into their situation—she had stalked away from him as best she could, and answered his regular questions of how she was feeling with the same monosyllable, "Fine," which was pretty much true, except for the lavender smell (but that night she'd had dreams in which she was driving and her skin, which was incredibly itchy, so much so that she was finding it difficult to concentrate on the road, began to crumble beneath her fingertips, becoming powdery, dusty, and suddenly all of her was on the verge of coming apart—for a moment, she was aware of her entire body drying, loosening, streams of dust pouring from her hands, her chin, her fingers raining down over the steering wheel, her body dissolving against the seat, her feet reducing to powder in her shoes—she had time for the panicked thought that she couldn't breathe, then that didn't matter anymore, and she collapsed—and woke with heart pounding, the baby kicking in response to her excitement, but that was fine, fine, because it meant she was still here, still in her body—for a good half hour, she ran her hands back and forth over her skin, reassuring herself with every pimple, every blemish, every strand of unwashed hair, that she was whole, not coming apart—Wayne must have noticed, but he remained silent, and another week would elapse before Jackie had gained sufficient distance from the dream and its sensations to narrate it to him—but, to her surprise, he didn't have an interpretation ready, just grunted and didn't refer to it again)]—

[—that dream sliding into one in which she was in her parents' den with Glenn, who was drunk again… still: he'd brought the bottle of gin and the bottle of tonic out beside the couch so he wouldn't have to travel so far to refill his glass, along with a bucket of ice from which he scooped half-melted cubes to deposit in his drink when it became too warm—the end of the world, or something close, and he'd spent pretty much all of it submerged in alcohol, because who was going to tell him not to? her parents hadn't returned from the trip to Shop Rite that shouldn't have taken them more than two hours, three at most, and that they'd left for twenty-two, no, twenty-four hours before, kissing her and ignoring Glenn (as they had ever since they'd learned the news of her pregnancy), promising to be back soon, a promise something had prevented them from keeping, which had her nervous but not as upset as she should have been; she wasn't done thinking they might yet appear, despite what the TV had shown before the channels started blinking off, whatever horror they'd been covering replaced by the tranquility of an electric blue screen—when Jackie climbed the stairs to the living room and looked out its picture window, all she saw was their slice of neighborhood, the same as ever: no fires, no riots, no people dying from whatever it was was boiling the flesh off their bones (which had spread faster than the pundits' ability to hypothesize explanations for it: a new strain of bird flu had given way to a bioweapon; some kind of mutated smallpox; which was more plausible, given its unbelievable virulence; but if so, whoever had released it had miscalculated, because it had taken the planet in its grip in all of three days—terrorism had been supplemented by other, more fanciful explanations: rampant nanotech, set free during the mishap at that plant in Albany the week before; an alien virus, imported by one of the meteors that had streaked across the sky a few nights ago; and, of course, the Wrath of God, and never mind that global events bore little to no resemblance to what was described in the *Book of Revelation*: the preachers who insisted on this answer had been so practiced at adapting Biblical texts to their own ends it was no surprise they should be able to do the same in this case) (and what about those other pictures she and Glenn had seen, almost lost in the rush of things falling apart? that couldn't have been the shadow of something walking falling across that building in Chicago, could it? the thought was absurd: it would have had to be impossibly tall—but what had collided with Air Force One? those hadn't been wings, had they?

equally ridiculous: you couldn't have a bird that size)—she gazed out the window and saw movement, a car speeding up the road—for a second, she was sure it was her parents, back from their trip at last, then she realized it wasn't their Subaru but a smaller car, a white Geo Metro, Wayne's car, which none of them ever stopped teasing him about, its engine straining as it raced along, and as she watched it, she was aware of something hovering over her, some badness preparing to fall on her and take her into its jagged gullet, and there was the opportunity for her to think, *Stay away, keep driving*, before, tires screaming, Wayne turned the car into her driveway, fishtailing half-onto the lawn, spraying chunks of dirt and grass—leaving the car running, he fell out of it and sprinted to the front door, hammering on it with both hands, shouting her name from a throat already worn hoarse—she remained where she was, hoping Wayne would race back to his undersized car and take away whatever catastrophe attended him, until she heard Glenn's slurred insistence that he was coming, for Christ's sake, keep your shirt on, so she crossed to the door, which Wayne had not stopped pounding on, fully intending to tell him to leave, whatever it was, it wasn't their problem (amazing to think that she could so completely turn her back on Wayne, whom she'd described as her best guy friend; after Glenn, of course; for years), but the instant she turned the lock, the door leapt open and Wayne was inside the house, shouting that she had to leave, now, there was no time—Jackie registered his smell, first, a heavy blend of copper and alkali: blood and fear, she realized as she took in his clothes, plastered and clotted with blood and other things (was that a piece of bone? that pink clump—)—This was already bad, and finally his words resolved themselves into sense and she placed her hand on his arm, wincing at the blood still fresh to the touch (what had happened to him?), telling him to relax, calm down, it was all right; but none of her reassurances reached him, he kept insisting they had to go and grabbed her by the arm, which was when Glenn found the top of the stairs and who knew what he saw? the guy he'd never stopped worrying about, the source of his anxieties about their relationship, come to carry Jackie away at last—she should have anticipated what came next, but despite his macho posturing, Glenn always had seemed to her fundamentally gentle, peaceful; still, there was nothing like a quart of gin-and-tonic to put you in touch with your inner linebacker, which he proved by barreling across the room, catching Wayne around the middle,

and slamming him into the wall with sufficient force to drop them both to the floor—Wayne kept hold of Jackie as long as he could, tumbling her backwards onto the couch—now Glenn was covered in gore, too, and raising his fist to pummel Wayne, who managed to wedge a leg between the two of them and kick Glenn off him, almost to the top of the stairs—Jackie, her hands pressed over her stomach, was shouting for the two of them to stop it, this was ridiculous, but Wayne hadn't liked Glenn any more than Glenn had him; jealous, she knew, although she'd done her best to ignore the reasons fueling that jealousy—the two of them rushed together and went down in a tangle of arms and legs, grunting and cursing each other, and Jackie thought, *Great: watch Mom and Dad come home, now*—then the picture window exploded inwards and a massive, snarling shape was standing in the living room, shaking glass off itself the way a dog might shake off water—she screamed, feet kicking her away from it, right up onto the couch—there was an instant for her to register the sheer size of the thing, its bulk: it had to stand four feet at the shoulder, with a hump that arched its back another foot over that, its head big as a Thanksgiving turkey, its feet the size of diner plates; and to think simultaneously, *What's a hyena doing in upstate New York?* and *This is no hyena*—before it pounced on Glenn, who had paused, arm upraised, when the window blew in—the thing caught his extended arm in its blunt jaws and tore it off at the shoulder: the crack and snap of bone and rip of sinew combining with the jet of blood and the scream from Glenn's throat and the growl from the thing's, a bass roar with the shriek of a violin on top of it—the thing held Glenn's arm dangling from its mouth like a puppy with a chew toy, then tossed the arm to one side with a flick of its head and lunged at him, while Wayne scrambled out of the way, his face blank with terror, and Jackie joined her scream to Glenn's as the thing bulled him back against the wall and seized his head between its teeth, his voice climbing registers she wouldn't have thought possible, surely his vocal cords would have to give out—she didn't know how much more she could bear—the thing brought its jaws together; there was a pop and crunch like an egg surrendering to the pressure of a hand; and Glenn's scream stopped; although Jackie's continued, pouring out her horror at what she was watching at the top of her lungs—even when Wayne found his feet, stumbled across the living room to her, right past where the thing was busy feeding, almost slipped on a large piece of glass, took her hand, and started

pulling her to the front door, which was still open, only to stop as a new sound flooded the air, a high-pitched cacophony like an orchestra out of tune, and dark shapes (who knew how many? twenty? thirty? more?) galloped up the road, almost to the end of her driveway—Wayne's hand trembled in hers as if he were being electrocuted; later, she would understand that his mind had been on the point of breaking, some fundamental motor about to snap its belt and seize up—she was taking in breath for another scream, because it was hard to take in enough air for a long scream when you were six and a half months pregnant (courtesy of a bottle of Jack Daniel's and the love of her life, who had just ended his life at the teeth of, of—), when Wayne's hand stilled; she glanced at his face, and what she saw reflected there, a change from vacant-eyed terror to something else, stopped her voice—"Come on," he said, pulling her away from the front door, across the living room (the thing growling and snapping at them, and, *Oh My God Glenn*), into the kitchen and the cellar door, down the stairs and across the cellar to the oil tank, with a stop at her father's workbench to grab a rag and the box of long wooden matches Dad had had on his workbench for as long as she could remember—overhead, the floor thumped and creaked, more of the things springing into the house—Wayne consulted the gauge on top of the oil tank, and began unscrewing it—the gauge turned once, twice, then stuck—he ran back to the workbench for a wrench while above, the things whined and growled, their claws skittering on the hardwood floor—*Glenn*, she thought, *They're fighting over him, over what's left of him*—Wayne had the gauge off; a thick, petroleum odor filled her nostrils; and was dipping the rag into the tank, first one half, then the other—he left the rag hanging out of the tank and slid open the box of matches—"Go to the outside doors and open them," he said, selecting three matches, "but not all the way, just enough to scope out the situation in the backyard"; she did as he instructed, unlatching and shouldering up the metal doors that led out of the cellar—the arc of yard she could see was green and tranquil—"Good," Wayne said, "when I say 'Now,' throw open the doors and run for your neighbors' house, the yellow one," and before she could ask him how he expected someone six and a half months pregnant to do anything that might remotely resemble running, he was scraping the first match along the side of the box—it popped into flame, and without pause he touched it to the end of the rag—a tongue of fire licked the rag,

and she was ten feet across the yard before Wayne shouted, "Now!" behind her, her belly and breasts swinging heavily, painfully; her legs protesting, threatening to cramp, already; her lungs burning; not looking back, because she didn't want to see the thing that killed her; she just prayed it would do so quickly; and Wayne was beside her, slowing his frantic pace to match hers, and they were at the edge of the yard when the oil tank blew, gutting the house in a yellow-orange BOOM that sent wood and glass spinning across the yard and triggered the gas tank beneath the window and, from the sound of it, Wayne's car—she could feel the heat from where she was, see the carcasses of she couldn't tell how many of the things sprawled around the house's wreckage—"Glenn," she said, but Wayne was urging her on—]
—

—once, she woke, saw Wayne sitting at the fire, and went back to sleep —

—and more dreams—[—they were inside the walk-in urgent-care building on Route 9, which Jackie had insisted they stop at for medical supplies and because they needed to attend to the slash zigzagging up Wayne's forearm, which she'd bound to the best of her ability but was worried was becoming septic: the skin around the black scab was yellow going to green, and the wound gave off a sweet smell that made her want to gag—at the very least, she wanted to locate a blister-pack of Zithromax for him; at most, if she could locate proper tools, debride it (the advantage of having [had] a nurse mother who was a frustrated doctor)—Wayne protested that he was fine, but went ahead of her through the building, a gun held in either hand, arms outstretched—Jackie had not yet decided she should be carrying a firearm, too, so she held the oversized flashlight they'd taken from her neighbors' house like a club; there was sufficient light in the corridors for her not to waste the batteries: although the fluorescent lights overhead were dark, the ceiling opened into skylights at regular intervals, which leaked in enough of the gray, rainy day outside to permit her and Wayne their search—she wasn't sure what, if anything, they would encounter in the urgent care's dim interior—she was reasonably certain they had gained sufficient ground on what she had started referring to as the Pack (following Wayne's lead; the name no doubt a comic book reference she wasn't plugged into) for them not to have to worry about coming face-to-snout with one of its snarling

constituents—one or more of the strange purple flowers seemed more likely: almost all the cars they'd seen on their trek up Route 9 had been full of the plants; although that was the only place they'd seen them: the various stores they'd entered for food, clothing, and assorted other supplies had been empty (she'd thought she had caught movement from the corners of her eyes, but when she'd looked, there had been nothing—most likely, her nerves tricking her)—despite which, Wayne refused to abandon caution, leaping through every open door with both guns pointed ahead, then sweeping them to either side as he glanced around the room, before calling, "Clear," to Jackie, who found his performance amusing in a way she knew she shouldn't have; caution was warranted, and Wayne had proven his ability a number of times, from turning her house into a bomb, which had reduced the Pack's ranks by at minimum a half, maybe sixty percent, to the previous day, when he'd lured one of the Pack's outriders into the walk-in freezer at a McDonald's and trapped it there—it was just, there was an element of the performative to Wayne's actions, as if he were seeing himself doing whatever he was doing in the panels of a comic, illustrated by one of his favorite artists—the last week and a half's events had damaged Wayne in ways you didn't need a degree in Psych to notice (although you would need a post-doc to plumb their depths)—she might be overreacting to the changes he'd displayed in his behavior: a ruthless, fiendishly inventive violence directed principally at their pursuers; or she might be misreading his response to the extremity of the past eleven days, but she was uncomfortably certain Wayne had developed a split in his personality, possibly a rough reorganization of his psyche that allowed him access to areas of his self previously road-blocked by norms of upbringing, society, and religion, possibly an entirely separate identity—it was as if he were living out one of the scenarios he'd read about for years, which might be the reason for her impression that, unimaginable psychic trauma and continuing horror and anxiety aside, on some level, Wayne was enjoying this, the world reshuffled into an arrangement he could deal with more competently and confidently than his previous existence of minimum-wage labor and career stagnation, each day's priorities food, sleep, and movement—in the second exam room they entered, they found a locked cabinet that Wayne broke open; it was stacked with blister packs and bottles of antibiotics and other medications, which Jackie swept into the plastic shopping bag she'd taken

from the Stop-N-Shop in great handfuls—in the third room, they found a steel box like an oversized pencil case that was full of scalpels, probes, and tweezers, as well as a dozen bottles of saline and an assortment of gauze bandages and rolls of surgical tape—"Jackpot," she said, (which had been her [dead] father's nickname for her until she'd turned twelve and refused to answer to it anymore; wiping her eyes, she choked down nostalgia)—she positioned Wayne with his arm on the edge of the room's sink, for the blood, and had him hold the flashlight with his free hand—he wasn't happy about having to put down the guns, but in the absence of any better source of light (there was no skylight in this room) there was no other option; he settled for balancing the pistols on the opposite side of the sink and instructing her to duck if anything came through the door, which she assured him would not be a problem—she rinsed the scab on his arm with saline, to moisten and loosen it, and went to work with the scalpel and probe, flaking away the crusted blood, easing the scalpel under more stubborn patches and levering them off, Wayne gasping as they tore away; once the wound was exposed, she used half a bottle of saline to irrigate it, washing out assorted pieces of debris in the process, and had Wayne bring the flashlight in close, so that she could study the cut, testing it as gently as she could with the probe, which made the light quiver, abandoning the probe for a pair of needling tweezers she used to pop a pocket of pus and lift a piece of something out of it (which she thought was a fragment of one of the Pack's teeth, and which she would have loved the chance to examine in greater detail, but which she didn't mention to Wayne, since he'd only remind her that she was a Biology student, not a world-renowned scientist who might be able to learn something helpful from the sample), after which she rinsed the pus out, surveyed the arm one more time, was satisfied, squeezed a heavy stream of antibiotic cream over the wound, and began bandaging it—Jackie had done her best not to look at Wayne's face as she was working, not wanting her focus to be compromised by the pain she knew she'd find twisting its features, but with his arm cleaned and tended to the best of her ability, not to mention enough drugs to knock out any lingering infection, she relaxed and glanced at him, smiling—to leap back with a shriek at what she saw: Wayne's face gone from the mouth up, shrouded in heavy oily blackness, as if someone had dumped a can of black paint over his head; except that, instead of running down his skin, this was

staying in place—Jackie backpedaled out of the room, into the hall, colliding with one of the walls, Wayne following, saying, "What? What is it?" pointing the flashlight at her, then up and down the hall, then back to her, the glare dazzling, reducing him to a silhouette; despite which, she could see something behind and above him, a cloud of blackness, billowing out like a cape or a pair of wings—she held one hand over her stomach, the other over her eyes as Wayne finally lowered the flashlight beam to the ground, still asking what it was, what was wrong, and when she risked a look at his face, it was clear of whatever she'd witnessed (if it had been there to begin with), nor was there anything behind him—she dropped her hands, waving his continuing questions away with, "Sorry—I just freaked out," a response she knew didn't satisfy him but that he was willing to let stand in the interest of maintaining their lead on the Pack—so far as she could tell, he didn't suspect she'd seen what she had—whatever it was—].

In the early morning—

—three thirty—

—Wayne woke her for the second watch—

—which Jackie spent sitting close to the fire, died to a heap of embers, wrapped in her sleeping bag, because the night had turned colder than she'd expected, colder than any recently (forecast of an early winter?), the rifle whose name she had meant to ask Wayne, to satisfy her curiosity, on the ground beside her; although every fifteen minutes or so she'd pick it up and sweep the end of the Bridge with the telescopic sight, Wayne's rope trap jumping into focus, but all she saw were the couple of cars beyond the trap on the Bridge, whose lights continued their climb up and down the spectrum, blue to red to blue again—she checked Wayne, too: asleep, so far as she could tell, in his sleeping bag—her dreaming still clinging to her, Jackie found herself, not for the first time, trying to imagine what had happened to him, speculating on the tectonic shifts in his psychic geography—he had refused to narrate what had taken place before he fled to her house, whose blood and gore had been spattered over him, but she knew that his mother stayed at home, and chances were good that his father and younger sister would have been there with her; since he wouldn't answer her questions about any of them, it seemed likely that they were dead, that the Pack had burst in on Wayne and his family and torn them to pieces in

front of him—which begged the question, *How had he escaped?* (not to mention, *Where had the Pack come from in the first place?*)—she suspected the answer was some variety of chance, dumb luck: maybe the Pack had come in through the back of Wayne's house, allowing him to run out the front door; maybe he'd fallen down the basement stairs and been able to sneak out the garage; it was possible his father or mother had created a diversion, sacrificed themselves to allow him to reach his car—that kind of trauma, combined with another close brush with the Pack in the form of the one that had killed Glenn, must have inaugurated some compensatory process, jury-rigged the freshly fractured fragments of his mind into an arrangement that would let him survive; and yes, she was aware that she was describing the ur-plot of any number of super-heroes' origins, the grievous psychic wound that gives rise to the costumed alter-ego, both answer to and continuing symptom of the trauma, but perhaps Wayne had reached for that template to keep what was left of his consciousness from flying off in all directions—how she wished she'd taken that class in Abnormal Psych this past semester, instead of putting it off for a future that hadn't come; although, would anything she would have covered in an undergraduate class have equipped her for this? and, more to the point, what was she looking for? to understand Wayne, or to try to cure him, which would consist of what, exactly? returning him to the calm, talkative guy she'd known half a million years ago?—could she afford that? would that Wayne be able to help keep her and her baby safe the way this Wayne (whom she thought of sometimes as Batman and sometimes as the Shadow; although she mentioned neither name to him), who apparently remembered every trick and trap he'd read in *Soldier of Fortune* and the *Getting Even* books, had proven he could?—the question was rhetorical; though how much safer was she with someone whose personality continued to drift in darker directions (or whose secondary personality seemed to be subsuming his first)? someone who; what was the right word? possessed? was possessed by? whatever the oily shadow that had masked his face, stretched behind him like a cloak, was, because however much she'd done her best to convince herself that she'd undergone some variety of hallucination, she knew that wasn't the case: she had seen what she'd seen, which she thought might have been drawn out from wherever it hid by his pain, by the stress of having to hold the flashlight on the wound Jackie had reopened and

picked through—in the two and a half weeks since, she'd kept on the lookout for it, but the closest she'd come to seeing it again had been last week, when she'd awakened from yet another dream of Glenn's dying scream to see Wayne leaning against the wall opposite her, an enormous shadow sprawling behind him—she'd sat up, heart jolting, only to discover it was a trick of the light (she thought)—so far, Wayne hadn't shown the slightest sign that he knew that she knew; although, how could she be sure? and she wondered if he were even aware of the darkness shadowing him—it was funny: you would have thought that here, now, in the country of fundamental things, she would have been able to turn to Wayne and ask him what was going on, and he would be able to answer her as directly, but no, she couldn't risk alienating him, making him feel she'd discovered a secret he wished to keep concealed, because what would she do if he abandoned her?—it was like when she'd learned definitely that she was pregnant, a pale blue plus confirming what her stomach had been telling her for weeks: you would have expected the gravity of the situation to have compelled her and Glenn, her and her parents, to talk about what mattered, but the opposite had been the case: Glenn hadn't been able to bring himself to say anything, as if he were afraid that putting words to their situation would be an irretrievable admission on his part, and so had retreated behind vague assurances and trying to have sex even more, since there was no point in worrying about protection now, which she had gone along with, even if they were in his car in the parking lot of the community college, because at least it was contact—as for her parents, they had refused to follow their initial expressions of dismay and (reluctant) support with anything—ironically, it had been Glenn's father, who had gone up one side of them and down the other, leaving the two of them in tears before ordering them the hell out of his house, and who had called at least once a week demanding to know what was going on, who seemed, in retrospect, the most honest of them all, the best able to express his feelings—no, the pressure of events didn't make conversation any easier; if anything, it made significant communication almost exponentially more impossible—all Jackie could say with any surety was that Wayne's shadow was connected to everything else, to the plague(s), the purple flowers, the Pack (which, to answer that other begged question, she had no explanation for: what they were, let alone where they'd come from; how they'd arrived in upstate New York pretty much overnight

—in too many ways to count, they didn't make sense; she had watched enough specials on *Nature* and *Nova* to know that predators this size and activity would require an enormous amount of food, which, as far as she could tell, was not available: she and Wayne had encountered only a handful of bodies in their travels [everyone else, she assumed, consumed by the virus she'd seen melting people's faces on CNN, which must have continued its work right down to the bones; although that was another problem], hardly enough to sustain even the Pack's reduced numbers, and they certainly didn't appear to have much interest in vegetation; though it was possible, she supposed—nor was there much sense in them pursuing her and Wayne for as long as they had: neither of them would make much of a meal for the Pack, and surely the animals[?] should have learned to associate following them with pain and death—it was like being caught in one of those z-grade science fiction movies where spectacle and suspense trumped logic and consistency: *Last Stand Against the Pack* or somesuch), all of them pieces to a jigsaw they'd lost the box to—during the second to last day of the week of rain, when the sky had delivered itself with such force it had been impossible to see anything out of the windows of the house they'd sought shelter in (whose driveway was occupied by a minivan filled with the largest example of the purple flowers they'd encountered yet), and the roof had creaked ominously with each gust of the wind, she and Wayne had diverted themselves by inventing explanations for what had befallen the world, the more fanciful, the better: God had decided that the apocalypse proposed in *Revelation* wasn't sufficiently *au courant*, and so had pillaged paperback thrillers for something with more panache; monsters had broken through from the other side of the mirror, Alice's Looking-Glass Land on acid; this world had intersected some other dimension, another Earth or even series of Earths, each of them radically different, and everything had become tangled (Wayne had coined the term "quantum rupture" for this scenario); the collective unconscious, the *Spiritus Mundi*, had burst, disgorging nightmares by the score—at one point, excited by what had felt like the resurgence of the old Wayne, the one with whom she could talk about anything, Jackie had tried to verbalize the feeling that had refused to abandon her since the catastrophes had begun: that somehow all of this was contingent, none of the changes that had contorted the world permanent, not yet—the best she could manage to explain the sensation was

to compare it to the way she'd felt after her best girlfriend, Elaine Brown, had been killed by a drunk driver on her way home from her job at Dunkin' Donuts the year before: for about a day after her parents had sat her down at the kitchen table to tell her, Jackie had been absolutely convinced that Elaine's death was not yet set in stone, that there was some way for her to change things, if only she could figure out what it was—she'd been in shock, yes, but it was as if that blow to her system had brought her temporarily closer to the machinery of the world, allowed her to feel the peeling away of this course of events from other possibilities—the sensation she had now was different mostly in terms of magnitude and duration: when Elaine had been killed, it had been like standing next to a small motor, a motorcycle, say, for twenty-four hours or so; this was like standing beside railroad tracks while a three-engine freight train rumbled past, night and day, for weeks—Wayne had named the feeling "quantum divergence," (an awful lot of quanta flying around that day), which sounded impressive but didn't really mean what he wanted it to—it was, Jackie said, like being able to feel the Fates changing the weave of the world—whatever name you gave her awareness, whether it was anything more than a peculiar effect of profound shock, a milder version of the transformations that were altering Wayne (for all she knew, it was a well-documented response to trauma), the problem with her conviction of the freight train of events rattling away from alternate scenarios was its utter uselessness: after all, what could she do about it? it wasn't as if she had the ability to reverse events, to cause the Fates to loosen what they'd woven and start again (though secretly she wondered if, somewhere, there might be a door that would open back to the world she'd known)—his attempt at naming it aside, Wayne hadn't known what to say to her sensation, and the conversation had moved on to other topics, to the baby, and how much longer till Jackie was due, and what were they going to do when she was ready to give birth?—at the time, she'd hoped they'd be able to use the facilities at Vassar Hospital, at which, at the rate they were going, she projected they'd arrive around the time the baby was about to come, and if the Pack had been defeated, killed by then, there would be no reason they couldn't set up camp in it; there was a lot to be said for staying in a hospital—but they had fled up Route 9 faster than she'd anticipated; the Pack had proven more wily and ever-more-difficult to kill, and now they would have to try one of the hospitals in

Kingston (if there were any point to it; if the baby were still alive; if her body didn't go into labor before then and deliver a stillborn child)—*Enough*, she thought, one hand rubbing her stomach in broad circles, as if it were a lamp and she summoning the genie; *Be all right*, she told the baby, *be all right*—funny, how much you could want something that intimidated the hell out of you, that you hadn't wanted in the first place but had felt powerless to refuse (thank you, twelve years of Catholic school), that had wrenched the wheel from your hands and turned your life onto an unexpected, unpaved road; talk about quantum divergence—she remembered the first time she'd felt the baby move, the first time she'd been sure, a flutter that had simultaneously freaked her out and thrilled her, and which had grown into kicks and jabs and using her bladder as a personal trampoline—the emotion that had grown up in response to her pregnancy had been different than what she'd expected: there had been none of the treacly sentimentality she'd been sure would ooze through her; instead, what had sprouted in her had been more basic, primitive, even, a deep connection to the child pushing out her belly, as if she could feel the umbilicus tying them together—the emotion had been supplemented by others: anxiety, mostly, and teary pathos, and occasionally profound contentment, as solid and heavy as a stone—*Be all right*, she told the baby, *be all right*.

Just before dawn—

—the sky filling with light, indigo paling to dark blue, the faintest stars fading out—

—the Pack came—

—their arrival heralded by the blat of a car alarm, which, she realized, Wayne must have rigged for exactly this purpose—in an instant, she had hefted the rifle to her cheek and one of the Pack leapt into focus; she moved the gun back and forth and saw two behind that one, and one more bringing up the rear, the four of them about ten feet behind the rope barrier, making their way slowly, placing each plate-sized foot with care, stopping to sniff the road in front of them, pausing to study the Bridge's support cables—there was enough time for Jackie to verify her initial count a second, a third time, and once she was certain that the four things she saw were the Pack, that was it, there were no others padding along behind them, her heart lifted with a fierce joy and she thought, *Four, there are four of them; we can do*

this; Wayne was right; we can be free of them, finally—they were in rough shape, these four; it looked as if they'd pulled themselves from the wreckage of the trap at the mall: their hides were decorated with cuts, slashes, burns; patches of hair had been torn and scraped away; flaps of skin hung down like streamers; the one she'd focused on first appeared to have something wrong with its left eye, which was crusted with dark blood, while the one bringing up the rear was trailing its left back leg behind it—that they had survived made them the fittest, yes, thank you, Mr. Darwin, but watching their cautious advance, Jackie was reminded of her grandmother's dog, a poodle that had been old when she was a child and had grown steadily more gray, more infirm, more trembling and tentative each year, and if her heart wasn't moved to pity; the last four weeks had insured the impossibility of that; the association tempered her joy—*It's time to end this*, she thought, and turned to wake Wayne, who was (of course) already up and jamming pistols into his jeans, slipping the strap of his bag-of-tricks over his head, his face still—he crouched beside her, holding a third pistol out to her: "In case one of them makes it past me," he said as she took it, checked the safety, and set it on the rock beside her—he reached for her backpack, dragged it around for her to lean on: "Take the one to the rear," he said, "and any others that try to escape," and before she could answer, he was running away from her, heading back along the ledge—holding the rifle aloft with her right hand, Jackie eased herself up and down, until she was lying against the backpack, then brought the rifle into position, fitting the stock against her shoulder, anchoring it against the meat to take the kick, which Wayne had assured her wasn't that bad—she looked through the sight and there were the Pack, stopped in their tracks, their hackles raised; she could hear them, a deep bass note like a viol whose strings were frayed out of true, and she curled her finger around the trigger, ready for them to panic and flee, reminding herself to squeeze, not pull, and wondering if she would be able to hit, let alone stop, any of them—Wayne was running down the road toward the Bridge, his hands empty, and when the Pack saw him, the note they were holding rose to a ragged shriek, drowning out whatever Wayne was shouting at them; taunting them, no doubt, urging them on (and a part of her wondered why that should work, why animals would respond to insult, and she wondered if they weren't animals, but wasn't sure what such a question implied, because she couldn't

imagine machines being bothered by Wayne's provocations, which left what? people? which was ridiculous).

It was over quickly—

—or so Jackie would think afterwards—while everything was taking place, it seemed to occur with agonizing slowness, almost a series of tableaux that shifted with each change in the Bridge's lights:

violet, and Wayne was in mid-run, his mouth open, his hands out to either side of him, the leader of the Pack's jaws tightening into a snarl that was strangely close to a grin, the others stepping forward;

blue, and Wayne was stopped, no more than twenty feet from the rope barrier, which, seen against the Pack drawing closer to it, seemed fanciful, a child's approximation of a more substantial arrangement;

green, and the leader was crouching to jump, Wayne's hands were still empty, the rear member of the Pack had ceased moving forward and appeared to be considering retreat; Jackie had its shortened head in the crosshairs;

yellow, and the leader was in the air, Wayne's hands were full of the pistols he was pointing not at the thing hanging suspended before him, but the pair behind it; the rearguard had turned to bolt, jerking its head out of the target, showing Jackie its neck;

orange, and the leader had struck the web and been caught in it, the ropes sagging but holding it up; the ends of Wayne's pistols were flaring white as he emptied them into the middle two members of the Pack, which lurched forward even as he blew their heads to pieces; the remaining thing was in the process of swinging itself around to flee, exposing the back of its head to Jackie's aim and she squeezed the trigger, the rifle flashing and cracking and slamming back into her shoulder, almost tearing itself out of her hands;

red, and she was struggling the sight back to her face, trying to find the last member of the Pack before it was too far away, hoping for one more shot, maybe she could wound it, cripple it and Wayne could finish it, but she couldn't see it, it was gone, and she swept the sight back and forth and there it was, its legs splayed out, the front of its head gone, shattered, and for a moment she was so happy she wanted to shout out loud, and then she

thought of Wayne and searched for him, her finger hovering over the trigger;

orange, again, and she saw that Wayne had abandoned the pistols, cast them to either side, and was walking towards the last member of the Pack, which had not succeeded in disentangling itself from Wayne's rope trap and which twisted and writhed, biting the air in its frustration; she thought, *What the hell?* and aimed for the thing's chest; but

yellow, and something was wrong, the sight was dark; she drew back from it, blinked, and looked through it, again;

green, and she saw that Wayne was wearing a cape, that he was trailed by a length of blackness that billowed behind and to either side of him, across which the green light rippled and shimmered;

blue, and Wayne was standing in front of the thing, his head covered by the same blackness, except for his mouth, which was saying something to the thing that scrambled to get at him, and Jackie should have been able to read his lips; she had always been good at that; but she couldn't believe what she was seeing;

violet, and Wayne had reached out arms coated in black, seized the last member of the Pack's jaws, and torn its head apart, the thing convulsing as blood as dark as whatever it was enshrouded Wayne geysered from its neck —without thinking, Jackie centered the crosshairs on Wayne's chest, on the darkness that she could swear was undulating across it, that, God help her, was twitching towards the blood misting the air, and time became a room she could walk around in, sorting out the multitude of voices screaming in her head: one of them shouting, "What the fuck!" and another, "What are you doing?" and a third, "How are you going to survive without him?" a fourth, "You owe him," and a fifth, "What *is* he?"—her finger light on the trigger; if she were going to do this, it had to be now; in another second, Wayne would notice what she was doing—then the lights went out on the Bridge, plunging her view into shadow, and the baby chose that moment to kick, hard, a blow that made her say, "Oof!" and release the trigger, and then whatever Wayne had set up on the Bridge detonated in a burst of light and sound, a brilliant white CRUMP that had her ducking behind the backpack, hands over her head, the rifle dropped, forgotten—the air around

her convulsed with the force of it; the rock behind her shuddered as the surface of the Bridge fell away to the river below, support wires snapping like overtightened guitar strings, shreds of metal, shards of pavement, a steering wheel raining around her as the Bridge groaned—Jackie risked a glance and saw it sagging inwards, its back broken, the forces it had balanced unleashed upon it—the suspension cables trembled, the towers leaned towards each other and she was sure the entire structure was going to twist itself asunder—the baby kicked again, a one-two combination, and she took what shelter she could behind the backpack, while the ledge continued to vibrate and the moan of thousands of tons of metal protesting its end echoed off the hills above her, making the baby squirm, and she covered her stomach with her hands, curling around it as best she could, saying it was all right, everything was all right—

—and after, Jackie set out north—

—past another trio of cars offering their floral inhabitants the same view day in, day out—she was accompanied by Wayne, who had reappeared while the Bridge was not done complaining (though it didn't fall: its towers canted crazily; its cables were too taut at the ends and too slack in the middle; and there was no way it was passable; but it still joined one shore to the other), and who was free of his black, what would you call it? costume? —she settled for accompaniment, awkward but accurate—in response to her question, he answered that yes, that was the end of them, but they had better get a move on: Kingston was a long way off, and who knew what this side of the Hudson would be like?—If he knew that Jackie had held him in her sights, cradling his life as she cradled the life of the baby who hadn't stopped reminding her of its presence these last hours, (which meant that [maybe] she could relax about it), or if he suspected the questions that balanced at the very limit of her tongue, threatening to burst forth with the slightest provocation, or if he guessed that she walked with one hand jammed into the sweatjacket she'd tugged on because she'd hidden the third pistol there, telling him it must have been carried off the ledge by the force of the explosion, Wayne gave no sign of it.

By nightfall, they had traveled far.

Kids

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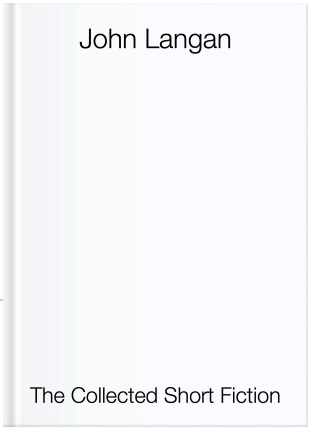

These were not his students. For one thing, he'd never taught kids this young: the oldest couldn't be more than six or seven, and the majority of the group crowding through his classroom door looked nearer four or five. For another thing, these children were beyond dirty, they were filthy: hair matted, skin thick with dirt, clothes a motley of stains. Not to mention the smell they brought with them: the pungence of garbage bags heaped high on the sidewalks outside cheap restaurants. For a moment, he was possessed by the conviction, by the absolute certainty, that he had stepped into a novel—*Oliver Twist*, perhaps, the Artful Dodger and his crew come calling, or possibly *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets*, the denizens of Crane's Manhattan paying a visit—which his mind quickly corrected: *I haven't stepped into the novel; the novel's stepped into me.* The sensation gave him an odd vertigo; he reached out a hand to his desk to steady himself. Behind the six- or seven-year-old, the children shuffled into the room *en masse*. Finding his voice, he said, "Can I help you?" and was surprised to hear the quaver in his words.

The children stopped where they were, the expressions on their faces those of small animals suddenly discovered by a predator. The possibility that this was some kind of strange joke, one of the seniors playing freak-out the hardass English teacher, flashed through his mind, only to be rejected as paranoia. Anyway, there was too much about the scene in front of him that didn't make joke-sense. It wasn't as if he were teaching Dickens right now—as if he ever taught Dickens, or Crane, for that matter. That he could recall, he'd never made mention of any phobias involving groups of small, dirty children, either. He stepped around the desk, closer to the kids. "Are you guys okay?" The children's eyes tracked him as he drew closer to them, bent over slightly as he said, "Are you lost? Were you on your way

someplace?" Maybe a student organization was doing something with kids from one of the more run-down sections of Worcester, having them to lunch or something. Although, Jesus, if that were the case, you'd think the kids' parents could have done a little more to clean them up. Not that they had to be wearing dresses and suits, but still… He looked at the children's eyes looking at him. How dark they all were, that dark brown that can seem indistinguishable from black. Strange to find a group of kids this size all with the exact same eye color. "Tell you what: why don't you come with me, and we'll see if we can't find out where you're supposed to be." He started to walk past them, toward the door.

He didn't see which one tripped him, was on the floor so quickly that it took a moment for his brain to register what had happened. "What…" He was all right, but he'd come this far away from braining himself on one of the students' desks. Probably an accident. "Hey," he said as he went to turn over.

The pain in his calf was sharp and burning. He shouted and swung his hand back without thinking. It connected with a child's head with a loud smack, rolled the kid off and away from him. *Shouldn't have done that,* he thought as he tried to stand. *But OW, the little punk bit me, look at that, he bit right through the leg of my pants.* It was true: the brown fabric was torn, along with the skin beneath. Blood was literally running out of the wound, tickling down his leg, damping his sock. *What the hell?* "All right," he said.

He wasn't all the way to his feet when the children broke over him. This time his head did connect with the corner of a desk. There was a flare of white light and then a gap, a moment when the world went far away. It returned on a wave of pain. His legs, his arms, his side—all on fire with, with… *Oh Christ, they're biting me! Good Lord, the little—they're biting me!*

They were. Looking at their mouths smeared with red, you might have thought they were playing at clowns, applying their mothers' lipstick with children's enthusiastic spasms. But one of them was licking her lips; another was *chewing,* for the love of God; a third was jerking his head back the way you do when you're trying to alley-oop a piece of food from your lip into your mouth. They were eating him. He could feel their teeth ripping pieces of him away. He tried to flail his arms, kick his legs, roll one way or

the other, but they had him pinned to the classroom floor. His shirt, pants—what hadn't been torn away—were sticking to him with his own blood. He tried to raise his head, to see what was being done to him, but all he could make out were small heads whose thick hair was slick with blood, with his blood. They pushed and shoved one another, jostling for the best places at the dinner table he had become.

No sound, he thought as consciousness spiraled down the drainpipe. They weren't talking, laughing, crying, making any of the sounds a group of children might make. There was only the noise of eating, flesh tearing, teeth clicking, lips smacking together.

How the Day Runs Down

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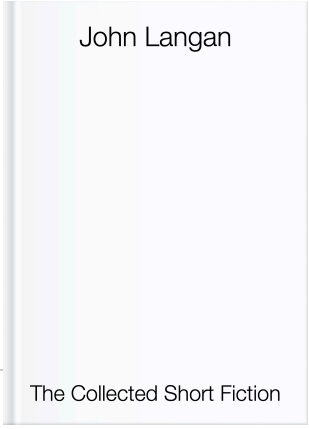

(The stage dark with the almost-blue light of the late, late night, when you've been up well past the third ranks of late-night talk shows, into the land of the infomercial, the late show movies whose soundtrack is out of sync with its characters' mouths and which may break for commercial without regard for the action on the screen, the re-broadcast of the news you couldn't bear to watch the first time. It is possible—just—to discern rows of smallish, rectangular shapes running across the stage, as well as the bulk of a more substantial, though irregular, shape to the rear. The sky is dark: no moon, no stars.

(When the STAGE MANAGER snaps on his flashlight—a large one whose bright beam he sweeps back and forth over the audience once, twice, three times—the effect of the sudden light, the twirl of shadows around the theater, is emphasized by brushes rushing over drums, which give the sound of leaves, and a rainstick, which conjures the image of bones clicking against one another more than it does rain.

(Having surveyed the audience to his apparent satisfaction, the Stage Manager trains his light closer to home. This allows the audience to see the rows of tombstones that stretch the width of the stage, two deep in most places, three in a couple. Even from his quick inspection of them, it is clear that these are old tombstones, most of them chipped and worn almost smooth. The Stage Manager spares a moment for the gnarled shape behind the tombstones, a squat willow, before positioning the flashlight on the ground to his left, bottom down, so that its white light draws a cone in the air. He settles himself down beside it, his back leaning for and finding a tombstone, his legs gradually crossing in front of him.

(It has to be said, even with the light shining right beside him, the Stage Manager is not easy to see. A reasonable guess would locate him somewhere in his late forties, but estimates a decade to either side would not be unreasonable. His eyes are deep set, sheltered under heavy brows and the bill of the worn baseball cap on his head. His nose is thick and may have been broken in some distant confrontation; the shadows from the light spilling across his face make it difficult to decide if his broad upper lip sports a mustache, although his solid chin is clear of any hair. His ethnicity is uncertain; he could put in an appearance at most audience members' family reunions as a cousin twice-removed and not look out of place. He is dressed warmly, for late fall, in a bomber jacket, flannel shirt, jeans, and heavy boots.)

Stage Manager: Zombies. As with most things in life, the reality, when compared to the high-tech, Hollywood gloss of the movies, comes as something of a surprise. For one thing, there's the smell, a stench that combines all the worst elements of raw sewage and rotted meat, together with the faint tang of formaldehyde. Folks used to think that last was from the funeral homes—whatever they'd used to pickle dear Aunt Myrtle—but as it turned out, this wasn't the case. It's just part of the smell they bring with them. Some people—scientists, doctors—have speculated that it's the particular odor of whatever is causing the dead to rise up and stagger around; to which speculations I gather there are objections from other scientists and doctors. But you don't have to understand the chemistry of it to know that it's theirs.

For another thing, when it comes to zombies, no one anticipated how persistent the damned things would be. You shoot them in the chest, they keep on coming. You shoot them in the leg—hell, you blow their leg clean off with your shotgun at point-blank range—they fall on their side, flop around for a minute or two, then figure out how to get themselves on their front so they can pull themselves forward with their hands, while they push with their remaining leg. And all the time, the leg you shot off is twitching like mad, as if, if it had a few more nerve cells at its disposal, it would find a way to continue after you itself. There is shooting in the head—it's true, that works, destroy enough brain matter and they drop—but do you have any idea what it's like to try to hit a moving target, even a slow-moving

one, in the head at any kind of distance? Especially if you aren't using a state-of-the-art sniper rifle, but the snub-nosed .38 you bought ten years ago when the house next door was burglarized and haven't given a thought to since—and the face you're aiming at belongs to your pastor, who just last Saturday was exhorting the members of your diminished congregation not to lose hope, the Lord was testing you.

(From high over the Stage Manager's head, a spotlight snaps on, illuminating OWEN TREZZA standing in the center aisle about three-quarters of the way to the stage. He's facing the back of the theater. At a guess, he's in his mid-thirties, his brown hair standing out in odd directions the way it does when you've slept on it and not washed it for several days running, his glasses duct-taped on the right side, his cheeks and chin full of stubble going to beard. The denim jacket he's wearing is stained with dirt, grass, and what it would be nice to think of as oil, as are his jeans. The green sweatshirt under his jacket is, if not clean, at least not marred by any obvious discolorations, although whatever logo it boasted has flaked away to a few scattered flecks of white. In his outstretched right hand, he holds a revolver with an abbreviated barrel that wavers noticeably as he points it at something outside the spotlight's reach.)

Owen: Oh, Jesus. Oh, sweet Jesus. Stop. Stop right there! Pastor Parks? Please—don't come any closer. Pastor? It's Owen, Owen Trezza. Please—can you please stay where you are? I don't want to—You really need to stay there. We just have to make sure—Jesus. Please. Owen Trezza—I attend the ten o'clock service. With my wife, Kathy. We sit on the left side of the church—our left, a couple pews from the front. Pastor Parks? Can you please stop? I know you're probably in shock, but—please, if you don't stop, I'm going to have to shoot. It's Owen. My wife's expecting our first child. She has red hair. Will you stop? Will you just stop? Goddamnit, Pastor, I will shoot! I don't want to, but you're giving me no choice. Please! I don't want to have to pull this trigger, but if you don't stay where you are, I'll have to. Don't make me do this. For Christ's sake, won't you stop? I have a child on the way. I don't want to have to shoot you.

(From outside the range of the spotlight, the sound of inexpensive loafers dragging across the carpet.)

Owen: Pastor Parks—Michael—Michael Parks, this is your final warning. Stop right there. Stop. Right. There.

(The shoes continue their scrape over the carpet. From the rear of the theater, a terrible odor rolls forward, like the cloud that hangs around the carcass of a deer two days dead and burst open on a hot summer afternoon. Owen's hand is shaking badly. He grabs his right wrist with his left hand, which steadies it enough for him to pull the trigger. The gun cracks like an especially loud firecracker and jerks up and away. Owen brings it back to aim.)

Owen: Okay—that was a warning shot. Now please stay where you are.

(The rough noise of the steps is joined by the outline of a figure at the edge of the spotlight's glow. Owen shoots a second time; again, the gun cracks and leaps back. He swings it around and pulls the trigger four times, straining to keep the pistol pointed ahead. Now the air is heavy with the sharp smell of gunsmoke. Hands at its sides, back stiff, swaying like a metronome as it walks, the figure advances into the light. It is a man perhaps ten years Owen's senior, dressed in a pair of khaki slacks and a black short-sleeved shirt whose round white collar is crusted with dried blood. Except for a spot over his collar, which is open in a dull, ragged wound the color of old liver, his skin is gray. Although it is difficult to see his face well, it is slack, his mouth hanging open, his eyes vacant. The hammer clacks as Owen attempts to fire his empty gun.)

Owen: Come on, Pastor Parks. I'm sorry I called you Michael. Come on—I know you can hear me. Stop. Please. Stop. Will you stop? Will you just stop? For the love of Christ, will you just fucking STOP!

(PASTOR MICHAEL PARKS—or the zombie formerly known by that name—does not respond to Owen's latest command any more than he has those preceding it. Owen's hands drop. A look passes over his face—the momentary stun of someone recognizing his imminent mortality—only to be chased off by a surge of denial. He starts to speak.

(Whatever he was about to say, whether plea or threat or defiance, is drowned out by a BOOM that staggers the ears. Simultaneously, the back of Pastor Parks's head blows out in a spray of stale blood and congealed brains

and splinters of bone that spatters those sitting to either side of the aisle. The minister drops to the floor.

(The Stage Manager has risen to his feet. In his right hand, he holds out a long-barreled pistol trailing a wisp of smoke. For what is probably not more than five seconds, he keeps the gun trained on the pastor's unmoving body, then raises the revolver and returns it to a shoulder holster under his left arm. Owen Trezza continues staring at the corpse as the spotlight snaps off. The Stage Manager resumes his seat.)

Stage Manager: No, there are some marksmen and—women about, that's for sure, but it's equally sure they're in the minority. Most folks have to rely on other methods. A few would-be he-men have tried to play Conan the Barbarian, rushed the zombies with a hatchet in one hand, a butcher knife in the other. One particularly inspired specimen, a heavyset guy named Gary Floss, rip-started the chainsaw he'd bought to take down the line of pines in front of his house. (This was a mistake: then everyone saw what lousy shape Gary kept his house in.) The problem is, that hatchet you have in your right hand isn't a weapon; it's a tool you've used splitting wood for the fireplace, and while it's probably sharp enough for another winter's worth of logs, it's not going to separate someone's head from their shoulders with a single blow from your mighty arm. The same thing's true for the knife sweating up your left hand: it's cutlery, and if you recall the effort it takes to slice a roast with it—a roast that is not trying to find its way inside your skull with its persistent fingers—you might want to reconsider your chances of removing limbs with ease. Even if you have a razor-sharp ax and an honest-to-God machete, these things are actually fairly difficult to use well. The movies—again—aside, no one picks up this kind of weapon and is instantly skilled with it; you need training. In the meantime, you're likely to leave your hatchet lodged in a collarbone, the pride of your assorted knives protruding above a hip.

As for Gary Floss and his chainsaw—you want to be careful swinging one of those around. A man could take off an arm.

(To the right and left of the theater, the snarl of a chainsaw starting. It revs once, twice, a third time, changes pitch as it catches on something. It blends with a man's voice shrieking—then silence.)

Stage Manager: What works is fire. Zombies move away from fire faster than they move toward a fresh kill. The problem is, they're not especially flammable—no more than you or I are—so you have to find a way to make the fire stick. For a time, this meant Billy Joe Royale's homemade napalm. A lingering sense of civic responsibility precludes me from disclosing the formula for Billy Joe's incendiary weapon, which he modified from suggestions in—was it *The Anarchist's Cookbook*? or an old issue of *Soldier of Fortune*? or something he'd watched on the Discovery Channel, back before it stopped broadcasting? (It's the damnedest thing: do you know, the History Channel's still on the air? Just about every other channel's gone blue. Once in a while, one of the stations out of the City will manage a broadcast; the last was a week and a half ago, when the ABC affiliate showed a truncated news report that didn't tell anyone much they hadn't already heard or guessed, and a rerun of an episode of *General Hospital* from sometime in the late nineties. But wherever the History Channel is located, someone programmed in twenty-four hours' worth of old World War II documentaries that have been playing on continuous loop ever since. You go from D-Day to Pearl Harbor to Anzo, all of it in black and white, interrupted by colorful ads for restaurant chains that haven't served a meal in a month, cars that no one's seen on the road for as long, movies that never made it to the theater. Truth to tell, I think the folks who bother to waste their generator's power on the TV do so more for the commercials than any nostalgia for a supposed Greatest Generation. These days, a Big Mac seems an almost fabulous extravagance, a Cadillac opulent decadence, a new movie an impossible indulgence.)

That's all a bit off-topic, though. We were talking about Billy Joe and his bathtub napalm. By the time he perfected the mixture, the situation here had slid down the firepole from not-too-bad to disastrous, all within the matter of a couple of days. Where we are—

Son of a gun. I never told you the name of this place, did I? I apologize. It's—the zombies have become so much the center of existence that they're the default topic of conversation, what we have now instead of the weather. This is the town of Goodhope Crossing, specifically, the municipal cemetery out behind the Dutch Reformed Church. Where I'm sitting is the oldest part of the place; the newer graves are…

(The Stage Manager points out at the audience.)

Stage Manager: Relax, relax. While there's nowhere that's completely safe anymore, the cemetery's no worse a danger than anyplace else. For the better part of—I reckon it must be going on four decades, local regulations have decreed that every body must be buried in a properly sealed coffin, and that coffin must be buried within a vault. To prevent contamination of groundwater and the like. The zombies have demonstrated their ability to claw their way out of all sorts of coffins time and again, but I have yet to hear of any of them escaping a vault. Rumors to the contrary, they're not any stronger than you or me; in fact, as a rule, they tend to be weaker. And the longer they go without feeding, the weaker they become. Muscle decay, you know. Hunger doesn't exactly kill them—it more slows them down to the point they're basically motionless. Dormant, you might say. So the chances are good that anyone who might have been squirming around down there in the dirt has long since run out of gas. Granted, not that I'm in any rush to make absolutely sure.

It is true, those who passed on before the requirement for a vault were able to make their way to the surface. A lot of them weren't exactly in the best of shape to begin with, though, and the ordeal of breaking out of their coffins and fighting up through six feet of earth—the soil in these parts is dense, thick with clay and studded with rocks—it didn't do anything to help their condition, that's for sure. Some of the very old ones didn't arrive in one piece, and there were some who either couldn't complete the trip or weren't coherent enough even to start it.

(Stage right, a stage light pops on, throwing a dim yellow glow over one of the tombstones and JENNIFER and JACKSON HOWLAND, she standing behind the headstone, he seated on the ground in front of and to its right. They are sister and brother, what their parents' friends secretly call Catholic or Irish twins: Jennifer is ten months her brother's senior, which currently translates to seventeen to his sixteen. They are siblings as much in their build—tall yet heavy—as they are in their angular faces, their brown eyes, their curly brown hair. Both are dressed in orange hunting caps and orange hunting vests over white cable-knit sweaters, jeans, and construction boots. Jennifer props a shotgun against her right hip and snaps a piece of bubble

gum. Jackson has placed his shotgun on the ground behind him; chin on his fists, he stares at the ground.)

Jennifer: I still say you're sitting too close.

Jackson: It's fine, Jenn.

Jennifer: Yeah, well, see how fine it is when I have to shoot you in the head to keep you from making me your Happy Meal.

(Jackson sighs extravagantly, pushes himself backwards, over and behind his gun.)

Jackson: There. Is that better?

Jennifer: As long as the person whose grave you're sitting on now doesn't decide your ass would make a tasty treat.

(Jackson glares at her and climbs to his feet.)

Jennifer: Aren't you forgetting something?

(She nods at the shotgun lying on the ground. Jackson thrusts his hands in the pockets of his vest.)

Jackson: I'm sure there'll be plenty of time for me to arm myself if anything shows up.

Jennifer: Don't be so sure. Christine Compton said her family was attacked by a pair of eaters who ran like track stars.

Jackson: Uh-huh.

Jennifer: Why would she make that up?

Jackson: She—did Mr. Compton kill them?

Jennifer: It was Mrs. Compton, actually. Christine's dad can't shoot worth shit.

Jackson: Regardless—they're both dead, these sprinting zombies. Again. So we don't have to worry about them.

Jennifer: There could be others. You never know.

Jackson: I'll take my chances. (Pauses.) Besides, it's not as if we need to be here in the first place.

Jennifer: Oh?

Jackson: Don’t you think, if Great-Grandma Rose were going to return, she would have already? I mean, it’s been like, what? ten days? two weeks? since the last ones dug themselves out. And it took them a while to do that.

Jennifer: Right, which means there could be others who’ll need even longer.

Jackson: Do you really believe that?

Jennifer: Look—it’s what Dad wants, okay?

Jackson: And we all know he’s the poster-child for mental health these days.

Jennifer: What do you expect? After what happened to Mom and Lisa—

Jackson: What he says happened.

Jennifer: Not this shit again.

Jackson: All I’m saying is, the three of them were in the car—in a Hummer, for Christ’s sake. They had guns. How does that situation turn against you? That’s an honest question. I’d love to know how you go from that to—

Jennifer: Just shut up.

Jackson: Whatever.

(The siblings look away from each other. Jackson wanders the graves to the right, almost off-stage, then slowly turns and walks back to their great-grandmother’s grave. While he does, Jennifer checks her gun, aims it at the ground in front of the tombstone, and returns it to its perch on her hip. Jackson steps over his shotgun and squats beside the grave.)

Jackson: Did Dad even know her?

Jennifer: His grandmother? I don’t think so. Didn’t she die before he was born? Like, years before, when Grandpa Jack was a kid?

Jackson: I guess. I don’t remember. Dad and I never talked about that kind of stuff—family history.

Jennifer: I’m pretty sure he never met her.

Jackson: Great.

(Another pause.)

Jennifer: You want to know what I keep thinking about?

Jackson: Do I have a choice?

Jennifer: Hey, fuck you. If that's the way you're going to be, fuck you.

Jackson: I'm sorry. Sorry, geez.

Jennifer: Forget it.

Jackson: Seriously. Come on. I'm sorry.

Jennifer: I was going to say that, for like the last week, I haven't been able to get that Thanksgiving we went to Grandpa Jack's out of my head. That cranberry sauce Dad made—

Jackson: Oh yeah, yeah! Man, that was awful. What was it he put in it…

Jennifer: Jalapeño peppers.

Jackson: Yes! Yes! Remember, Grandpa started coughing so hard—

Jennifer: His teeth shot out onto Mom's plate!

Jackson: Yeah… (He wipes his eyes.) Hey. (He stands, stares down at the grave.) Is that—what is that?

Jennifer: What?

Jackson (pointing): There. In the middle. See how the ground's…

(Jennifer positions her gun, setting the stock against her shoulder, lowering the barrel, and steps around the headstone.)

Jennifer: Show me.

(Jackson kneels, brings his right hand to within an inch of the ground.)

Jennifer: Not so close.

Jackson: You see it, right?

(Jennifer nods. Jackson rises and steps back onto his gun, almost tripping over it.)

Jennifer: You might want to cover your ears.

(Jennifer fires five times into the earth. Jackson slaps his hands to either side of his head as dirt jumps up from the grave. The noise of the shotgun is considerable, a roar that chases its echoes around the inside of the theater.

There’s a fair amount of gunsmoke, too, so that when Jennifer steps back and raises her gun, Jackson coughs and waves his arms to clear the air.)

Jackson: Holy shit.

Jennifer: No sense in doing a half-assed job.

Jackson: Was it her?

Jennifer: I think so. Something was right at the surface.

Jackson: Let’s hope it wasn’t a woodchuck.

Jennifer: Do you see any woodchuck guts?

Jackson: I don’t see much of anything. (He stoops, retrieves his shotgun.) Does this mean we can go home?

Jennifer: We should probably wait a couple more minutes, just to be sure.

Jackson: Wonderful.

(The two of them stare down at the grave. The stage light pops off.)

Stage Manager: Siblings.

Right—what else can I tell you about the town? I don’t imagine latitude and longitude are much use; I’m guessing it’ll be more helpful for me to say that New York City’s about an hour and a half south of here, Hartford an hour and a half east, and the Hudson River twenty minutes west. In an average year, it’s hot in the summer, cold in the winter. There’s enough snow to give the kids their fair share of snow days; you can have thunderstorms so fierce they spin off tornadoes like tops. At one time, this was IBM country; that, and people who commuted to blue-collar jobs in the City at places like Con Ed. That changed twice, the first time in the early nineties, when IBM collapsed and sent a host of middle-aged men and women scrambling for work. The second time was after 9/11, when all the affluent folks who’d suddenly decided Manhattan was no longer their preferred address realized that, for the same amount of money you were spending on your glorified walk-in closet, you could be the owner of a substantial home on a reasonable piece of property in place that was still close enough to the City for you to have a manageable commute.

Coming after the long slowdown in new home construction that had followed IBM’s constriction, this sent real estate prices up like a Fourth of

July rocket. Gentrification, I guess you'd call it. What it meant was that your house significantly appreciated in value in what seemed like no more than a month—it wasn't overnight, no, not that fast, but fast enough, I reckon. We're talking thirty, forty, fifty percent climbs, sometimes higher, depending on how close you were to a Metro-North station, or the Taconic Parkway. It also meant a boom in the construction of new homes—luxury models, mostly. They didn't quite achieve the status of McMansions, but they were too big on the outside with too few rooms on the inside and crowded too close to their neighbors, with a front yard that was just about big enough to be worth the effort it was going to cost you to yank the lawnmower to life every other Saturday. If you owned any significant amount of property, the temptation to cash in on all the contractors making up for lost time was nigh-irresistible. That farm that hadn't ever been what you'd call a profit-machine, and that had been siphoning off more money that it gave back for more years than you were comfortable admitting, became a dozen, fifteen parcels of land, a new little community with a name, something like Orchard Hills, that you could tell yourself was an acknowledgment of its former occupant.

What this expansion of houses meant was that, when the zombies started showing up in significant numbers, they found family after family waiting for them in what must have seemed like enormous lunchboxes.

(From the balcony, another spotlight snaps on, its tightly focused beam picking out MARY PHILLIPS standing in front of the orchestra pit. Although she faces the audience, her gaze is unfocused. She cannot be thirty. Her red hair has been cut recently—poorly, practically hacked off in places, where it traces the contours of her skull, and only partially touched in others, where it sprouts in tufts and a couple of long strands that suggest its previous style. The light freckles on her face are disturbed by the remnants of what must have been an enormous black eye, which has faded to a motley of green and yellow, and a couple of darker spots, radiating out from her right eye. She is wearing a white dress shirt whose brownish polka dots appear to have been applied irregularly, even haphazardly, a pair of almost-new dark jeans, and white sneakers clumped with mud. She keeps her hands at her sides in tight fists.)

Mary: I was in the kitchen, boiling water for pasta. We'd had a gas delivery a couple of weeks before—it's funny: everything's falling to pieces—this was after the first outbreak had been contained, and all the politicians and pundits were saying yes, we'd had a close call, but the worst was past—what had happened in India, Asia, what was happening in South America—none of that was going to happen here. No matter that there were reports the things—what we were calling the eaters, because zombies sounded too ridiculous—the eaters had been sighted in a dozen different places from Maine to California, none of them previously affected. You heard stories: my next-door neighbor, Barbara Odenkirk—she was the HR director for an ad agency in Manhattan, and she commuted to the City every day, took the train from Beacon. The last time we talked, she told me that there were more of them, the eaters, along the sides of the tracks every trip. She said none of the guys on the train acted particularly concerned—if an eater came too close to a moving train, it didn't end well for them. I asked her about the places alongside the tracks, what about them, the towns and cities and houses—I'd taken that same ride I don't know how many times, when Ted and I first started seeing one another, and I remembered all the houses you saw sitting off in the woods. Oh, Barbara said, she was sure the local police were on top of the situation. They weren't, of course, not like Barbara thought. I don't know why. When that soccer game in Cold Spring was attacked—we were so surprised, so shocked, so outraged. We should have been packing our cars, cramming everything we could fit into our Volvos and BMW's and heading out of town tires screaming. Where, I'm not sure. Maybe north, up to the Adirondacks—I heard the situation isn't as bad there. Even the Catskills might have been better.

But the gas truck pulled into the driveway the way it did every six months, and the power was on more than it was out, and we could drive to Shop Rite—where, if the shelves were stocked thinner than we'd ever seen them, and the butcher case was empty, not to mention the deli and fish counters, we could fill our baskets with enough of the foods we were used to for us to tell ourselves that the President was right, we were through the roughest part of this, and almost believe it. Ted had bought a portable generator when the first outbreak was at its height and it looked as if Orlando would be overrun; everyone else was buying whatever guns they could lay their

hands on, and here's my husband asking me to help him unload this heavy box from the back of the car. He was uptight—I think he was expecting me to rake him over the coals for not having returned from Wal-Mart with an armful of rifles. I wasn't angry; if anything, I was impressed with his foresight. I wasn't especially concerned about being armed—at that point, I still believed the police and National Guard were capable of dealing with the eaters, and if they weren't, I was surrounded by neighbors who were two steps away from forming their own militia. The blackouts, though—we were lucky: the big one only lasted here until later that same night. According to NPR, there were places where the lights were out for a week, ten days. But there were shorter outages every few days, most no more than five or ten seconds, a few a solid couple of hours. Having the generator—not to mention the big red containers of gas I had no idea how Ted had obtained: rationing was already in effect, and most gas stations were pretty serious about it—that generator gave me a feeling of security no machine gun could have matched. To tell the truth, I was more worried by Ted's insistence that he could hook it up himself. Being in IT does not give you the magical ability to master any and all electrical devices—how many times had I said that to him? Especially when Sean Reynolds two houses over is an electrician who loves helping out with this kind of stuff. But no, he's fully capable of doing this, which is what he'd said about the home entertainment system he tripped half the circuit breakers in the house setting up. What was I supposed to do? I made sure to unplug the computers, though, as well as the entertainment center.

Somehow—with a lot more cursing than I was happy with the kids hearing from their father—he succeeded, which is why, on that particular afternoon, I was standing at the kitchen stove waiting for a pot of water to reach the boil. Robbie had asked for mac and cheese again, and I wasn't inclined to argue with her, since Brian would eat it, too, and we had more than enough boxes of it stacked in the pantry. It was the organic kind that only needed a little bit of milk added to make the sauce, which I thought was more economical; although the stuff had cost more to begin with, so where's the sense in that? The power had gone out an hour earlier, and while we tried to use the generator prudently, starting it up now didn't seem especially extravagant. I waited until I was ready to start dinner, then ran out onto the

back porch, down the stairs, and under the porch to where Ted had installed the generator. When Ted was home, the moment he heard that lock click, he dropped whatever he was doing to dash into the kitchen and asked if I'd made sure it was safe to go outside. No mater what I replied, he'd insist on checking, himself—as if he could see better through his glasses than I could with 20/20 vision. I got that it was a guy thing, and in its own way I suppose it was kind of sweet. Really, though—unless there was an eater standing outside the door, I didn't think I had anything to worry about. They weren't much for running—most of them had trouble walking. Okay, high school track was ten years and two kids in my past, but I was still in good enough shape from chasing after those kids to leave Ted eating my dust. Granted, my husband's idea of exercise was putting away the dishes; the point is, I wasn't concerned about being caught by an eater. From what I'd heard on the radio, they were most dangerous in large numbers, when they could trap you. Sure, there were woods at the edge of the backyard that could have hidden a decent-sized group of them, but I was fairly confident my well-armed neighbors would mow the lot of them down the second they staggered into the open. We were pretty anal about checking the tree line; I tried to do it at least once an hour, usually on the hour when the hall clock played its electronic version of the Westminster Chimes, but some of the neighbors were at their windows every fifteen or twenty minutes. Matt Odenkirk had a pair of high-powered binoculars—they looked like they cost a bundle—and he would stand on his back porch staring into the woods for minutes at a time. It was as if he was certain the eaters were out there, doing their best to blend in with the foliage, and all he needed was to catch one of them moving to reach for the equally expensive-looking rifle balanced against the railing and be the hero of the neighborhood. Which never happened. I don't think he fired that gun once—I don't think it was in his hands when—when they—when he—

The generator started no problem; I was out and in the house almost before the kids realized. I turned on the stove light and filled a pot with water from the cooler—which always drove Ted crazy. "That's for drinking only," he'd say. "Use the water from the filter jugs for cooking." But our water tasted funny; I'm sorry, it did, and no matter how many times you passed it through those jugs, it was like drinking from a sulfur spring. "What do you

mean?" Ted would—he'd insist. "It tastes fine." Okay, I'd say, then you can drink it, which he would, of course, to prove his point. When he wasn't home, though—on a day like today, when he'd driven in to IBM because they were open—I can't imagine what they could have been doing, what business they could have been conducting, with everything the way it was—on a day like today, we used the bottled water for cooking.

I lit the burner, set the pot on it, and switched on the transistor radio. Usually, I kept the radio quiet, because who knew what the news was going to be today? Granted, NPR wasn't as bad as any of the TV channels, which, as things had deteriorated in Florida and Alabama, had taken to broadcasting their raw footage, so that when Mobile was overrun, you saw all the carnage in color and up close and personal. But NPR had sent a reporter to Mobile, and when the National Guard lines collapsed, she was caught on the wrong side—trapped inside a car. The eaters got her, and you heard pretty much everything. First, she's saying "Oh no, oh please," as they pound on the car windows. Then the windows shatter, she screams, and you can hear the eaters, the slap of their hands on the upholstery as they grab her at her and miss, the rip of the reporter's clothes where they catch her, and their voices—I know there's a lot of debate about the sounds they make, whether they're expressions of coherent thought or just some kind of muscle spasm, but I swear, I listened to that broadcast all the way through, and those were voices, they were saying something. I couldn't make out what, because now the reporter was shrieking, emptying her lungs in panic and pain. I thought that was as bad as it would get—as it could get—but I was wrong. There was a sound—it was the sound a drumstick makes when you twist it off the Thanksgiving turkey, a long tearing followed by a pop—only it was… wet. The reporter's voice went from high to low, from scream to moan, and that moan—it was awful, it was what comes out of you the moment you set one foot into death and feel it tugging the rest of you after. The rest—one of the eaters figured out how to open one of the car doors. Whatever the reporter was wearing rasped on the seat as she was dragged out, her moan rising a little as she realized this was it, and then there was a noise like the rest of that Thanksgiving bird being torn apart in all directions, this succession of ripping and snapping, and then you hear the

eaters feeding, stuffing pieces of the reporter into their mouths, grunting with pleasure at the taste. It—

Robbie was old enough to understand what was on the radio, and even Brian picked up on more than you expected. I didn't want to expose them to something like that. As it was, they heard too much from the other kids in the neighborhood, especially the McDonald girls. Alice, their mother, was one of those parents who likes to pretend they're treating their kids with what they call respect, when really, all they're doing is exposing them to all kinds of things they're too young to handle. A parent—a mother isn't supposed to—that's not your job. Your job—your duty, your sacred duty—it is your sacred duty to protect those children, to keep them safe no matter what—you have to protect them, no matter—

Well, I was. With the generator running, I could let them watch a DVD, which had gone from a daily occurrence—sometimes twice daily—to a treat, just as going to the movies had been when I was their age. They were so thrilled Robbie was willing to sit down to *The Incredibles*, which Brian adored, although it didn't do anything for her. So with the two of them safely seated in front of the TV, I was safe to turn on the radio, low, and try to catch up with what news I could as the water came to a boil.

And you know, the news wasn't bad. I wouldn't call it good, exactly, but the National Guard seemed to be making progress. They'd held on to Orlando, although apparently Disneyworld was the worse for it; and they'd caught a significant number of the eaters on one of the major highways—I can't remember the number; it may have been Highway 1—where they'd brought in the air power, let the planes drop bombs on the eaters until they were in so many microscopic pieces. Given what we learned about them in the weeks after, this was about the worst thing that could have happened, since it spread bits of them and their infection to the four winds, but at the time it sounded like a step forward. There was talk of retaking Mobile; a team of Navy SEALs had rescued a group of survivors holed up in City Hall, and a squad of Special Forces had made an exploratory journey into the city that had brought them to within sight of the harbor. Of course, the powers-that-be are going to tell you that things are better than they are, but I was willing to believe them.

I heard the truck pull up outside, heard the slow rumble of its engine, the squeal and hiss of its air brakes. I noticed it, but I wasn't especially concerned. The Rosses had sold their house across the street to a couple from the City who supposedly had paid them almost a million dollars for it. The news made our eyes goggle; Ted and I spent a giddy couple of hours imagining how we might spend our million. Once we went online to check housing prices in the Adirondacks, though, all our fantasies came crashing down. Up north, a million was the least you'd pay for a place not even half the size of ours. We knew Canada had closed the border, but we looked anyway. With the state of the U.S. dollar, it was more like 1.5 million for the same undersized house. It appeared we would be staying where we were. And we'd have new neighbors, whose moving truck had arrived.

Sometimes, I think about that driver. I don't know anything about him—or her, it could have been a woman; although, for some reason, I always picture a man. Not a kid: someone in his fifties, maybe, kind of heavyset, with a crewcut that doesn't hide the gray in his hair. He's been around long enough to have seen all kinds of crises, which is why he doesn't panic, keeps working through this one. No one else at the delivery company wants to make the drive upstate with him, risk the wilds to the north, but he's happy to leave the City for a day. Everybody's on edge. There are soldiers and heavily armed police clustered at all the docks, the airports, the train stations, the bus terminals. Everyone who arrives in the City is supposed to be examined by a doctor flanked by a pair of men who keep the laser-sights of their pistols centered on the traveler's forehead for the duration of the exam. The slightest cause for concern—fever, swollen and tender glands, discolored tongue—is grounds for immediate quarantine. Protest, and those men to either side of the doctor are expressly authorized to put a pair of bullets in your head. What's worse is, with the police largely off the streets, groups of ordinary citizens have taken it on themselves to patrol the City for eaters. They've given themselves license to stop and question anyone they consider suspicious, and if you ask what gives them the right, they'll be only too happy to show you the business ends of their assorted pistols and rifles. There's been at least one major shootout between two of these patrols, each of whom claimed they thought the other were eaters. Cops had

to be pulled off port duty to bring it under control, which they did by shooting most of the participants.

I can't imagine anything happened to the driver while he was in the City. My guess is, he passed through the checkpoints and was on his way without a hitch. It was a nice, early fall morning, the air cool but not cold, the leaves on the verge of losing their green, the sun bright but not oppressive. Maybe he had the radio on, was listening to one of the AM stations out of the City. He heard the news out of Florida and thought, *I knew it.* He decided to take the next exit, stop at a Dunkin' Donuts for a celebratory coffee and a Boston Cream.

As he steered into the parking lot, maybe he noticed the absence of any other cars. Or maybe he saw the lights on in the donut shop and assumed he'd arrived during a lull in business. He parked the truck, climbed down from the cab, and walked toward the glass door. There are times I see him striding up to the counter, his eyes on the racks of donuts on the wall opposite him, not aware of anything unusual until he sees that all the racks are empty. In what feels to him like slow-motion, he turns to the tables to his right and takes in the floor slick with blood, the remains of the last patrons scattered across the tables. Then I think, *That's ridiculous—there's no way he would not have seen all of that right away.* The second he swung open the door, he would have smelled it. Chances are, he wouldn't have had to go that far—he would have seen the blood splashed across the windows and immediately turned around. Either way—whether he bolts out of the place or walks away without going in—he would be distracted, shocked by what he's (almost) seen. Maybe the closest he's been to something like this has been an image on the TV. It's the reason he doesn't pick up on the feet dragging across the tarmac until the eater is out from around the front of the truck and practically on him. The driver's eyes bulge; if he's never been this close to such carnage, you can be sure he's never had an eater lurching toward him, either. His feet catch on one another and he trips, which causes the eater to trip and fall on top of him. For one horrifying moment, he's under the thing, under that stink, the teeth clacking in his ear as it tries to take a bite out of him, those hands pawing at him. He drives his right elbow back and up into its face. Fireworks of pain burst in his arm, but the eater rolls off him. He scrambles to his feet, kicking at the eater's hands as they

try to drag him down again, and climbs up and into the truck's cab. Maybe he jumps when the eater slaps the door, almost drops the keys his fingers can't fit into the ignition. The eater pounds the door, throws itself against it, actually makes the truck rock ever so slightly. The key slides into place, the engine turns over, and the driver grinds the gears, putting the truck into first. He speeds out of that parking lot so fast the rear end of the truck bashes a telephone pole, throwing open one of the rear doors and tumbling a couple of plastic crates out onto the road. His foot doesn't leave the gas pedal. Let them take it out of his pay. His heart is hammering, his hands trembling on the wheel. If he smokes, he's desperate for a cigarette; if he quit, he wishes he hadn't; if he never has, he wishes he'd started.

It wouldn't have been until that Dunkin' Donuts was a good thirty, forty minutes in his rearview mirror that the driver would have felt his right elbow throbbing. When he glances down, he sees blood on the seat and floor. He turns his arm over. His stomach squeezes at the torn skin bright with blood, the pair of broken teeth protruding just above the joint. His foot relaxes on the gas; the truck slows to the point it is barely moving. His vision constricts to a tunnel; he wonders if he is about to faint. He takes the wheel with his right hand, reaches around with his left, and feels for the jagged edges of the eater's teeth. The blood makes them slippery, hard to keep hold of. He digs his fingers into his skin, seeking purchase, but that only squeezes out more blood. There is no choice; he has to stop. He clicks on the hazards, steers to the shoulder, and sets the brake. He does not turn off the engine. He leans over and slides the first aid box out from under his seat. His fingers slip on the catch. Once he has it open, he finds the bottle of sterile saline and the stack of gauze bandages. He sprays half the bottle over his elbow, unwraps a couple of bandages, and wipes his skin. There is a pair of tweezers in the box; despite his shaking hand, he succeeds in tugging one, and then the other, tooth from his arm. Their extraction causes more bleeding. He drops the tweezers on the floor, next to the teeth, and empties the remainder of the saline on his elbow. There are enough gauze pads left for him to wipe his elbow off and improvise a bandage using the roll of surgical tape.

No one really understood what brought the eaters out of the ground, up off their tables in the morgues and funeral homes, in the first place. There was

all kinds of speculation, some of it ridiculous. Hell was full: Ted and I had a good laugh over that one. Some of it was more plausible but still theoretical: NPR had on a scientist from the CDC who talked about a kind of super-bacteria, like a nasty staph infection that could colonize a human host in order to gain more flesh to consume; although that seemed like a lot for a single microorganism to accomplish. Besides, none of the eaters the government had captured showed the slightest response to any of the antibiotics they were injected with. I wondered if it was a combination of causes, several bacteria working together, but Ted swore that was impossible. Because the IT thing made him an expert in bacteriology, too.

What we did know was that, if an eater got its teeth in you, even if you escaped becoming its next meal, you were finished all the same. It just took longer—between thirty minutes and forty-eight hours. The initial symptoms were a raging fever, swollen and tender glands, and a tongue the color of old meat; in short order, these were followed by hallucinations, convulsions, and death. Anywhere from five minutes to two hours after your heart had ceased beating, your body—reanimated was the technical term. It was incurable, and if you presented to your doctor or a hospital ER with the telltale signs, you were taken as fast as possible to a hospital room, hooked up to monitors for your heart rate and blood pressure, and strapped onto a bed. If there was an experimental cure making the rounds that day, it would be tested on you. When it didn't work, you would be offered the services of the clergy and left for the inevitable. An armed guard was stationed outside your door; after the monitors had confirmed your death, he would enter the room, unholster his pistol, and make sure you didn't return. At first, the guards were given silencers, but people complained, said they felt better hearing the gunshot, knowing they were safe.

I don't know how much of this the driver knew, but I'm guessing he'd heard most of it, which is why he didn't take himself to the nearest hospital as soon as he realized what had happened to him. Instead, he switched off the hazards, released the brake, and headed back out onto the road. It could be he was thinking he had to make this last delivery while he could, but I doubt it. He was already dead; his body simply needed to catch up to that fact. His mind, though—his mind was not having any of this. As far as his mind was concerned, he'd scraped his arm, that was all, hardly enough to

have turned him into one of those things, and if he went on with this day the way he'd intended, everything would be fine. If he had to roll down his window, because the cab had grown so hot he checked to be sure he hadn't turned the heater on high, he must be fighting off the cold that was making the rounds at work. That same cold must be what was causing the skin under his jaw to feel so sore. The temptation to tilt the rearview mirror so he could inspect his tongue must have been almost too much to resist.

If the driver heard anything moving in the back of the truck, he probably assumed it was more of the plastic crates come loose, maybe a piece of furniture that had broken the straps securing it. Of course, by then his fever would have ignited, so the eaters could have banged around the inside of that container for the hours it took him to complete what should have been a sixty-minute trip, and I doubt he would have noticed. Or the sounds might have registered, but—you know how it is when you're that sick: you're aware of what's going on around you, but there's a disconnect—it fails to mean what it should. How else do you explain what led this guy to drive a large moving truck full of eaters into the middle of a neighborhood—into the middle of our neighborhood—my neighborhood, the place where I lived with my husband and my kids, my girl and my boy—how else do you explain someone fucking up so completely, so enormously?

That's right—the truck that came to a stop outside the house as I watched bubbles forming at the bottom of the pot of water I was heating was full—it was packed with eaters. Don't ask me how many. And no, I don't know how they got in there. I'd never heard of anything like that before. Maybe the things were chasing someone who climbed into the back of the truck thinking the eaters wouldn't be able to follow them and was wrong. Maybe the eaters started as a group of infected who were in the same state of denial as the driver and wanted to hide themselves until they recovered—which, of course, they didn't. Maybe they didn't jump into the truck all at the same time: maybe a few were in pursuit of a meal, a few more were looking to hide, and a few others thought they'd found a cool place to escape the sun. As the fever soared within him, his neck ached so bad swallowing became agony, his tongue swelled in his mouth, the driver must have let the truck slow to a stop over and over again, leaning his head on the steering wheel

for whatever comfort its lukewarm plastic could provide. There would have been plenty of opportunities for eaters to hitch a ride with him.

I don't know what that man's fate was, whether he died the moment he set the parking brake, or opened the door and stepped down from the cab to let his customers know their furniture had arrived, or if the eaters figured out the door handle and dragged him from his seat. But I hope they got to him first; I hope he found himself in the middle of a group of eaters and had consciousness left to understand what was about to happen to him. I hope—I pray; I get down on my knees and plead with God Almighty that those things ripped him apart while his heart was still beating. I hope they stripped the flesh from his arms and legs. I hope they jammed their fingers into him and rooted around for his organs. I hope they bit through his ears the way you do a tough piece of steak. I hope he suffered. I hope he felt pain such as no one ever felt before. That's why I spend so much time imagining him, so that his death can be as real—as vivid—to me as possible. I—

The first bubbles had lifted themselves off the bottom of the pot and drifted up through the water to burst at the surface. On the radio, the report about the Special Forces in Mobile had ended, and the anchor was talking about sightings of eaters in places like Bangor, Carbondale, and Santa Cruz, which the local authorities were writing off as hysteria but at least some of which, the anchor said, there was disturbing evidence were true; in which case, they represented a new phase in what he called the Reanimation Crisis. From the living room, Brian yelped and said, "Scary!" which he did when something on the screen was too much for him; Robbie said, "It's okay—Vi's gonna get them out. Watch," one of those grace notes your kids sound that makes you catch your breath, it's so unexpected, so pure. There was a knock at the front door.

It sounded like a knock. When I rewind it and play it again in my mind, it still sounds like a knock, no matter how I try to hear it otherwise. None of the descriptions of the eaters mentioned anything about knocking. Besides, I hadn't heard anyone's gun going off, which I fully expected would announce the arrival of eaters in our neck of the woods. Of course, this was because everyone was watching the treeline behind the houses; I realize how ridiculous it sounds, how unforgivably stupid, but it never occurred to

any of us that the eaters might walk right up to our front doors and knock on them. Or—I don't know—maybe we were aware of the possibility, but assumed there was no way a single eater, let alone a truckload of them, could appear in the middle of the street without someone noticing.

I left the pot with the wisps of steam starting to curl off the water and walked down the front stairs to the door. At the top of the stairs, I thought it might be Ted home from work, but on the way down I decided it couldn't be him, because he wouldn't have bothered knocking, would he? It had to be a neighbor, probably the McDonald girls come to ask if Robbie wanted to go out and play with them. They were forever doing things like that, showing up five minutes before dinner and asking Robbie to play with them—which, the second she heard their voices, Robbie naturally was desperate to do. I tried to compromise, told Robbie she could go out for a little while after she was done with her food, or invited the McDonald girls to join us for dinner, but Robbie would insist she wasn't hungry, or the McDonald girls would say they had already eaten, or were going to have pizza later, when their father brought it home. At which, Robbie would ask why we couldn't have pizza, which Brian would hear and start chanting, "Piz-za! Piz-za! Piz-za!" Sometimes I let Robbie run out and kept a plate warm for her, let her eat with Ted and me when he got home, which she loved, being at the table with Mommy and Daddy and no little brother. Sometimes, though, I told the McDonald girls to return in half an hour, Roberta was sitting down to her dinner—and prepared myself for the inevitable storm of protests. I hadn't made up my mind what my decision this time would be, but my stomach was clenching. I turned the lock, twisted the doorknob, and pulled the door open.

They say that time slows down in moments of crisis; for some people, maybe it does. For me, swinging that door in was like hitting the fast-forward button on the DVD player, when the images on the screen advance so fast they appear as separate pictures. One moment, I'm standing with the door in my hand and a trio of eaters on the front step. They're women, about my age, I think—the one nearest me is missing most of her face. Except for her right eye, which is cloudy and blue and looks as if it's a glass eye that's been scuffed; I'm staring at bare bone adorned with tatters and

shreds of muscle and skin. Her mouth—her teeth part, and I have the absurd impression she's about to speak to me.

The next moment, I'm scrambling up the stairs backwards. I could leap them three at a time—I have in the past—but there's no way I'm turning my back on the figures who have entered the house. The pair behind the faceless one don't appear nearly as desiccated: their skin is blue-gray, and their faces show no expression, but compared to what's raising her right foot to climb the stairs after me, they're practically normal.

The moment after that, I'm in the kitchen, one hand reaching for the handle of the pot of water, which hasn't come to full boil yet. Behind me, I can hear the stairs shifting under the eaters' weight. I can smell them—God, everything I've heard about the way the things smell is true. I want to call to the kids, tell them to get in here with me, but it's all I can do not to vomit.

That second, the second my fingers are closing around the handle—that's the one I return to. When I replay the three minutes it took for my life to disintegrate, I focus on me in the kitchen. I can't remember how I got there. I mean, I know how I went from the stairs to the kitchen, I don't know why. Once I reached the top of the stairs, it would have been easy enough to haul myself to my feet and run into the living room, to Robbie and Brian. We could have—I could have shoved the couch out from the wall, used it to delay the eaters while we ran for the back door—or even around them, back down the stairs and out the front door, or into the downstairs rec room. We could have barricaded ourselves in the garage. We—instead, I ran for the kitchen. I realize I must have been thinking about a weapon; I must have been searching for something to defend myself—us with, and the pot on the stove must have been the first thing that occurred to me. This has to be what made me choose the kitchen, but I can't remember it. All I have is me on the stairs, and then my fingers curling around that piece of metal.

Which isn't in my hand anymore; it's lying on the kitchen floor, and Miss Skull-Face's right eye has sagged downwards because the pot has collapsed her cheek where it struck it. The hot water doesn't appear to have had any effect on her, although a couple of the pieces of flesh dangling from her face have fallen onto her blouse. She's moving toward me fast, her hands outstretched, and I see that she's missing two of the fingers on her left hand,

the ring and pinkie, and I wonder if she lost them trying to prevent whoever it was from tearing off her face.

The next thing, I'm on the floor, on my back, which is numb. My head is swimming. Across the kitchen tiles from me, Miss Skull-Face struggles to raise herself from her back. At the time, I don't know what's happened, but I realize now the eater's rush has carried us into the wall, stunning us both. The other eaters are nowhere to be seen.

And then I'm on the other side of the kitchen island, which I've scooted around on my butt. I'm driving the heel of my left foot straight into the eater's face, the shock of the impact traveling through the sole of my sneaker up my leg. I feel as much as hear the crunch of bone splintering. I'm as scared as I've ever been, but the sensation of the eater's face breaking under my foot sends a rush of animal satisfaction through me. Although I'm intent on the web of cracks spreading out from the sudden depression where Miss Skull-Face's nose and cheeks used to be, I'm aware that her companions are not in the kitchen.

I must—if I haven't before, I must understand that the other eaters have left Miss Skull-Face to deal with me and turned in search of easier—of the—I know I pull myself off the floor, and I'm pretty sure I kick the same spot on the eater's face with the toe of my sneaker, because afterwards it's smeared with what I think are her brains. What I remember next is—

(To the front, rear, left, and right of the theater, the air is full of screaming. At first, the sound is so loud, so piercing, that it's difficult for anyone in the audience to do anything more than cover her or his ears. Mary raises her hands to either side of her head; it does not appear that the Stage Manager does, even as the screams climb the register from terror to pain. Muffled by skin and bone, the screams resolve themselves into a pair of voices. It is hard to believe that such noises could issue from the throats of anything human; they seem more like the shrieks of an animal being vivisected. As they continue for four, five, six seconds—an amount of time that, under other circumstances, would pass almost without notice but that, with the air vibrating like a plucked guitar string, stretches into hours—it becomes possible to distinguish the screams as a single word tortured to the edge of intelligibility, made the vessel for unbearable pain: "Mommy."

(The screaming stops—cut off. Mary removes her hands from her ears hesitantly, as if afraid her children's screams might start again.)

Mary: That's—there are—they—there are some—I don't—there are some things a mother shouldn't have to see, all right? My parents—I—when I was growing up, our next-door neighbor's oldest son died of leukemia, and my mother said, "No parent should outlive their children." Which is true. I used to think it was the worst thing that could happen to you as a parent, especially of small children. But I was wrong—I was—they—oh, they had them in their teeth—

(Now Mary screams; head thrown back, eyes closed, hands clutching her shirt, she opens her mouth and pours forth a wail of utter loss. When her scream subsides to a low moan, her head drops forward. She brings her hands to her head, runs one over it while the other winds one of the long strands of her hair around itself.

(From the front of the theater, Mary's voice speaks, but from the echoey quality of the words, it's clear this is a recording.)

Mary's Voice: That second, the second my fingers are closing around the handle—that's the one I return to. When I replay the three minutes it took for my life to disintegrate, I focus on me in the kitchen. I can't remember how I got there. I mean, I know how I went from the stairs to the kitchen, I don't know why. Once I reached the top of the stairs, it would have been easy enough to haul myself to my feet and run into the living room, to Robbie and Brian. We could have—Robbie and Brian. I didn't want to expose them to something like that. A parent—a mother isn't supposed to—that's not your job. Your job—your duty, your sacred duty, is to protect those children, to keep them safe no matter what—we—instead, I ran for the kitchen. I realize I must have been thinking about a weapon; I must have been searching for something to defend myself—us with, and the pot on the stove must have been the first thing that occurred to me. This has to be what made me choose the kitchen, but I can't remember it. You have to protect them, no matter—

(The recording stops. The spotlight snaps off, and Mary is gone, lost to the darkness.

(Slowly, the Stage Manager comes to his feet. Once he is up, he looks away from the audience, toward the willow behind him. He takes a deep breath before turning towards the audience again.)

Stage Manager: Here's the problem. When you sign up for this job—when you're cast in the part, if you like—you're told your duties will be simple and few. Keep an eye on things. Not that there's much you can do—not that there's anything you can do, really—but there isn't much that needs doing, truth to tell. Most of the business of day-to-day existence takes care of itself, runs ahead on the same tracks its used for as long as there've been people. Good things occur—too few, I suppose most would say—and bad things as well—which those same folks would count too numerous, I know—but even the very worst things happen now as I'm afraid they always have. Oh, sure, could be you can give a little nudge here or there, try to make sure this person won't be at work on a June morning that'll be full of gunfire, or steer the cop in the direction of that house she's had a nagging suspicion about, but mostly you're there to watch it all take place.

Then something like this—then this, these zombies, folk getting up who should be lying down—it overtakes you, sweeps across the world and your part of it like—like I don't know what, something I don't have words for. You do the best you can—what you can, which mostly consists of putting on a brave face and not turning your eyes away from whatever horror's in front of you; although there may be opportunities for more direct action.

(Through his jacket, the Stage Manager pats his gun.)

Stage Manager: You try to maintain some semblance of a sense of humor, which is not always as hard as maybe it should be. There's something to the old saw about horror and humor being flip sides of the same coin. An idiot takes his arm off with his chainsaw trying to play hero—I grant you it's pretty grim fodder for laughs, but you make do with what's to hand—so to speak.

A situation like this, though, like this poor woman and her children—those children—I know what she saw when she ran into that living room. I know what that is on her shirt, and how it got there. I can't—I don't have the faintest idea what I'm supposed to do with that knowledge. I could tell you, I suppose, but to what end? You know what those things—those eaters,

that’s not a bad word, is it?—you know what they did to that little girl and that little boy. There’s no need for the specifics. Maybe you’d rather hear about the scene that greeted Mary when she fled her house in horror, or maybe you’ve guessed that, too: her neighbors’ houses overrun, pretty much without a single shot being fired.

This is the beginning of the second phase of the zombie trouble—what did that newscaster call it? The Reanimation Crisis? From something people were watching on their TVs, or seeing outside the windows of their trains, zombies become something that’s waiting for you when you go to get in your car, that clatters around your garage, that thumps on your door. Situation like this, where folks have known the world’s going to hell and been preparing themselves for it—which mostly means emptying their bank accounts accumulating as many guns as Wal-Mart’ll sell them—you’d expect that all that planning would count for something, that those zombies never would have made it up Mary’s front walk, that one or the other of her neighbors would have noticed what was tumbling out the back of that delivery truck and started shooting. There’d be lot of noise, a lot of mess, possibly a close call or two, but everything would turn out well in the end. Mary would be home with her kids, her neighbors would be patting themselves on the backs with a certain amount of justifiable pride, and at least one zombie outbreak would have been contained. Instead, Mary’s the only one to escape alive, which she accomplishes by running screaming out of her house, up the street and out onto Route 376, where she’s struck by a red pickup truck driven by an eighteen-year-old girl who received it as a birthday present from her parents last month.

Mary avoids being hit head-on, which would have killed her, but she’s tossed to the side of the road. To her credit, the girl stops, reverses, and leaves the truck to see to the woman who collided with it. Actually it’s a risky move—for all the girl knows, she could have knocked down a zombie. Mary’s pretty seriously concussed, but it’s clear to the girl she hails from one of the big houses on the side street—the houses from which a few zombies are emerging, doused with blood. The girl doesn’t waste any time: she hustles Mary into her truck and literally burns rubber racing away. The girl—who deserves a name: she’s Beth Driscoll—Beth takes Mary into the center of Goodhope Crossing, to the new walk-in emergency-care place,

and stays with her as the doctor examines her with an openly worried expression on his face. Mary's in what he's going to call a fugue state—like being part of the way into a coma—and she's never going to surface from it. The doctor—Dr. Bartram, for the record—tries to arrange for an ambulance to transfer her to one of the local hospitals, but all at once the ambulances are very busy. By the time he considers driving her himself, the police will have told everyone to stay off the roads. When those same police start stumbling through the front doors with wounds of their own for the doc to treat, Mary will be placed on a cot in one of the hallways and left there. Beth will check on her as she's able, which won't be much, because she'll be busy helping the doc and his staff with the injured. After the medical facilities are transferred to St. Pat's church hall, Mary's installed there, given a futon-bed and a molded plastic chair and a garbage bag full of assorted sweatpants, T-shirts, underwear, and socks. Beth tends to her as she can.

Ted doesn't show up looking for his wife. In fairness to him, that's due to his having parked in front of his house about two minutes after Beth sped off with Mary. Once he realized what was taking place, he bolted his car for the house, whose front door he'd noticed open and which had him dreading the worst. The worst met him at the door, in the form of the pair who'd devoured his children, one of whom was holding Brian's stuffed frog, which was dark with blood. You may consider it a kindness that Ted died without seeing what was left of his beloved daughter and son upstairs.

Mary can eat and drink, use the toilet if you take her to it. Speak to her, and she'll bob her head in your direction. There are times, after Beth has sat with her for an hour, maybe read to her from the Bible (which Beth secretly hopes might produce a miraculous cure), the girl looks at Mary half-slumped in her chair, or reclining on her bed, and wonders if Mary isn't lucky to be like this, safe from the chaos that's descended on the world. She has no idea—she can have no idea that deep within Mary's psyche, she's standing at that stove for the ten thousandth time, watching a pot full of water begin to boil, waiting for her children to start screaming.

(The Stage Manager sighs, looks up, looks down, rubs his hands together half-heartedly, sighs again.)

Stage Manager: I never finished telling you about the town, did I? Not that it makes much difference at this point, but maybe one or two of you are curious.

(Once more, the Stage Manager settles himself on the ground, against the headstone; although he appears to have more trouble finding a comfortable position than previously.)

Stage Manager: All right. What more is there to say about Goodhope Crossing? The longer-term history of the town isn't that much different from that of any other in this neck of the woods. There were farms around these parts as far back as the Dutch, but Goodhope Crossing, as the name suggests, owes itself to the railroads. In the years after the Civil War, when track was stitching up the country everywhere you looked, three north-south lines and one east-west line met one another right here.

(From the orchestra pit, a quartet of wooden train whistles sound softly.)

Stage Manager: There was a long, low hill to the east of the junction, a stream and some flatter land to the west. The town was plotted on that axis, the poorer folk crowding their small houses together on the hill, the better off setting up Main Street and its larger dwellings on the other side of the stream. From those two locations, the town spread outward, most of the commercial establishments opening on the other side of the hill, while the majority of new homes went up on and just off Main Street. Lot of Irish settled here; Poles and Italians, too. Big Catholic population: the local church, St. Patrick's, started on Main Street and by the turn of the century had moved across the stream to the top of another hill just south of the one most of its parish lived on. St. Pat's was part of the Archdiocese of New York; right before everything fell apart, they were the third or fourth largest congregation in the fold.

Interestingly—you might even say ironically—enough, pretty much the entire surviving population has relocated to the hill, which remained a location of more… affordable housing. Control the high ground: it's what a military strategist will tell you, and it's a good plan, for zombies as much as anything. Once the half-dozen or so who'd staggered up Concord Street were dealt with, and all the dwellings had been checked and double-checked to be sure they were clear, folks started putting up the best barrier

they could as fast as they could around the foot of the hill, tipping over cars; running barbed wire; propping up old boxsprings, mattresses; piling whatever looked as if it might hold a walking corpse at bay long enough for you to have a clear shot at it: sofas, bureaus, bookcases, china cabinets.

(From either side of the theater, the sounds of men and women grunting, furniture creaking atop other furniture.)

Stage Manager: Hillary Schwabel, who used to manage the local True Value hardware, strung some wires all the way around what people already had christened the Wall and hooked them to several of her louder alarms; she also hung a dozen motion-detector lights from trees and houses next to the Wall. Things are so sensitive a cat'll trip them, but it beats the alternative. As a rule, zombies travel in numbers; when you see one of them, you see ten, twenty, sometimes as many as fifty, a hundred. A significant percentage of that group is going to be limber enough to make a try at getting past the Wall—and all it takes is for one of them to succeed, grab someone and start biting, for you to want to know they're moving in your direction while they're still a safe distance away. It's another myth that they only, or mostly, move at night. Their eyesight's poor-to-nonexistent—apparently, the ravages death inflicts on the eyes are exacerbated by the process of reanimation. Although they never stop moving completely, if you should have the misfortune to come across them after dark, they're likely to be shuffling their feet, practically standing in place. No, they prefer the light; the dawn pouring through the trees sets them going. A bright day is practically a guarantee you're going to see some of them.

All that said, a few of them have been known to travel by night, especially if the moon is full. And even inching forward a little bit at a time will bring you somewhere, eventually. Better safe than sorry, right?

Have you noticed how disasters bring out the clichés in droves? Why is that? Is the trite and overused that consoling? Or is it that, even though the brain is short-circuiting, it still wants to grasp what's going on, so it reaches for whatever tools are at hand, no matter how worn and rusted? Or is the language breaking down along with everything else? I've never been what you'd call a poet, but I have always prided myself on my phrasing, on a knack for finding a fit and even memorable form for whatever sentiment I'm attempting to convey. Lately, though—lately, I swear I sound more and

more like a parody of a Good Ole Boy, your folksy uncle with his bucket of country wisdom.

Nor is that the worst. Before everything went down the crapper, one of my—you might say duties, although I considered it more a responsibility, if that distinction means anything to you—anyway, one of the things I did was to help those who'd shuffled off their mortal coils come to grips with their new condition. Mostly, this meant talking with them, taking them for a last look at their loved ones, about what you'd expect. In a few cases, I let them have one of their days over again, which, knowing what they knew now, tended to be a more unhappy experience than they'd anticipated. Even after I'd spoken to them, showed them what I could, there were a few who refused to walk down the long dark hall to join the ranks of those who'd gone before, who insisted on remaining in their house, or at the spot they'd ceased breathing, which was a shame, but was allowed for.

Once the dead started to rise, though—for the one thing, death no longer separated what lasted form what didn't; instead, the two remained bound together as the one began its new existence. For another thing, the destruction of that second life—or un-life—didn't allow matters to proceed on their natural course. Instead… well, maybe you want to see for yourselves.

(The theater's lights come on. Their harsh brightness reveals the center aisle, side aisles, front, and rear of the theater crowded with figures—with zombies, it appears, since the men, women, and children surrounding the audience bear the familiar signs of decay. Whatever shock and fear the appearance of so many of them in such proximity engenders, however, is gradually tempered by their complete lack of movement. Indeed, with the exception of one figure shuffling its way from the very back of the theater up the center aisle, the apparent zombies might as well be mannequins.)

Stage Manager: Being chained to that body as it stumbles along in the single-minded pursuit of flesh, as it finds and kills and consumes that flesh—it isn't good for the other part, for what I call the spark—it twists it, warps it, so that when it's cut loose, this is how it appears. Mostly. A few—I haven't worked out the exact numbers, but it's something on the order of one in a thousand, fifteen hundred—they show up hostile, violent, as if what they last were in life has followed them across its borders. There's no

talking to them, let alone reasoning with them. I'm not certain what they could do to me—there've been rumors through the grapevine, but you know how that it is—but I'm not inclined to find out.

(The Stage Manager rises to his feet, withdrawing his revolver from its shoulder holster on the way. In a continuous motion, he extends his arm, sights along the long barrel of the gun, and squeezes the trigger. The gun's BOOM stuns the air; the young man in the brown three-piece suit who is approximately halfway to the stage jerks as the back of his head detonates in a surprisingly solid clump. The young man falls against one of the motionless forms in the aisle, an old woman wearing a blue dress and a knitted white pullover, who barely moves as he slides down her to the floor. The Stage Manager maintains his aim at the young man for five seconds, then levels the gun and sweeps it across the theater. It is difficult to ascertain whether his eye is on the figures in the aisle, the audience in their seats, or both. Unable to locate any further threats, he re-holsters the pistol. He remains standing.)

Stage Manager: That's—there's nothing else I can do. It means—I don't like thinking about what it means. It's a step up from what a fellow like that was, but—it's not a part of the job I relish. Could be, it would be a service to the rest of these folks, but I haven't got the stomach for it.

(The Stage Manager lowers himself to the ground. The lights dim but not all the way. The forms in the aisles remain where they are.)

Stage Manager: Once in a while—it's less and less, but it still happens—a regular person finds his way here. That was how I had the chance to talk with Billy Joe Royale, he-of-the-famous-homemade-napalm. I'd witnessed his handiwork in action—must have been the day after the day after that truckload of zombies parked in the middle of Mary Phillips's neighborhood. The number of zombies had increased exponentially; the cops had been overrun in most places; the National Guard who were supposed to be on their way remained an unfulfilled promise. Those who could had retreated to the parking lot of St. Pat's, which, since the hill hadn't yet been fortified, looked to be the most defensible position. I reckon it was, at that. There wasn't time for much in the way of barriers or booby-traps, but those men and women—there were forty-six of them—did what they could.

(From the right and left of the theater comes a cacophony of gunfire; of voices shouting defiance, instructions, obscenity, encouragement; of screams. It is underscored by a frenzied, atonal sawing of the violins. It subsides as the Stage Manager continues to speak, but remains faintly audible.)

Stage Manager: In the end, though, no matter how much ammunition you have, if the zombies have sufficient numbers, there's little you can hope for aside from escaping to fight another day. These folks couldn't expect that much: they'd backed themselves against the church's north wall, and the zombies were crowding the remaining three sides.

Exactly how Billy Joe succeeded in evading the zombies, finding his way inside St. Pat's, climbing up the bell-tower, and shimmying out onto the roof—all the while carrying a large cloth laundry bag of three-liter soda bottles full of an extremely volatile mixture—I'd like to take credit for it, but I was down below, all my attention focused on the by-now forty-two defenders staging what I was sure was their updated Alamo. They were aiming to die bravely, and I was not about to look away from that. When the first of Billy Joe's soda-bottle-bombs landed, no one, myself included, knew what had just taken place. About twenty feet back into the zombies' ranks, there was a flash and a clap and an eruption of heavy black smoke. Something had exploded, but none of the men and women could say what or why. When the second, third, fourth, and fifth bombs struck in an arc to either side of the first, and smoke was churning up into the air, and the smell of dead skin and muscle barbecuing was suddenly in everyone's nostrils, it was clear the cavalry had arrived. A couple of guys looked around, expecting a Humvee with a grenade-launcher on top, or an attack helicopter whose approach had been masked by the noise of the fighting. The rest were busy taking advantage of the wall of fire the bombs had created, which separated the zombies on this side of it from those on the other, reducing their numbers from who-could-count-how-many to a more manageable thirty or forty. While they worked on clearing the zombies closest to them, Billy Joe continued to lob bottle after bottle of his fiery concoction, dropping some of them into the thick of the zombies, holding onto others almost too long, so that they detonated over the zombies,

literally raining fire down on their heads. He'd stuffed twenty-three bottles into that laundry bag, and he threw all but one of them.

(The din of the battle rises again, accompanied by the pops of a drumstick tapping on a drum, and the lower thrum of viols being plucked. The pops increase, the thrums increase, then the violins scream an interruption and all noise stops.)

Stage Manager: That last bomb was what killed him, a single-serve Coke bottle that remained in his hand past the point of safety. It blew off his right arm to the elbow and hurled him flaming from the roof. He didn't survive the fall, which was just as well, since his burning corpse was shot by roughly half the people he'd saved. Stupid, but understandable, I guess.

He took longer to show up than I'd anticipated, the better part of a day, during which his identity and his actions had been discovered, along with the two hundred additional bottles of napalm standing row after row in his parents' basement. Unfortunately, he hadn't seen fit to leave the formula, but those bombs were a big down payment on buying those among the living sufficient time to move to the hill and begin the process of securing it. There've been a couple of tries at duplicating his secret mix, neither of which ended well.

(From the rear of the theater, the faint *crump* of explosions.)

Stage Manager: As for Billy Joe…

(Stage left, a stage light pops on, throwing a dim yellow glow over one of the tombstones and BILLY JOE ROYALE, who is a very young sixteen, his face struggling with its acne, a few longish hairs trying to play a goatee on his chin. He is dressed in an oversized blue New York Giants shirt, baggy jeans, and white sneakers. A backwards baseball cap lifts the blond hair from his forehead, which emphasizes the surprise smoothing his features. He hooks his thumbs in the pockets of his jeans in what must be an effort at appearing calm, cool. He sees the Stage Manager and nods at him. The bill of the Stage Manager's hat tilts in reply.)

Billy Joe: So are you, like, him?

Stage Manager: Who is that?

Billy Joe: You know—God.

Stage Manager: I’m afraid not.

Billy Joe: Oh. *Oh.* You aren’t—

Stage Manager: I’m more of a minor functionary.

Billy Joe: What, is that some kinda angel or something?

Stage Manager: No. I’m—I meet people when they show up here, help them find their bearings. Then I send them on their way.

Billy Joe: Like a tour guide, one of those hospitality guys.

Stage Manager: Close enough.

Billy Joe: Where am I headed?

(The Stage Manager points stage right.)

Stage Manager: You see that hall over there?

Billy Joe: That looks pretty dark. I thought it was supposed to be all bright and shit.

Stage Manager: No, that’s just an effect produced by the cells in your eyes dying.

Billy Joe: Oh. Where does it go?

Stage Manager: Where everyone else has gone.

(Billy Joe notices the figures in the aisles. He nods at them.)

Billy Joe: What about them? Are they—

Stage Manager: Yes.

Billy Joe: Shouldn’t they be moving down that hall, too?

Stage Manager: They should.

Billy Joe: So why aren’t they?

Stage Manager: I’m not sure. It’s got something to do with what’s going on—where you came from.

Billy Joe: These guys were like, the living dead?

Stage Manager: That’s right.

Billy Joe: Wild. Any of them try to eat you?

Stage Manager: A couple.

Billy Joe: What’d you do?

Stage Manager: I shot them in the head.

Billy Joe: Huh. That work, here?

Stage Manager: It seemed to do the trick.

Billy Joe: It’s just, I thought, you know, being where we are and all—

Stage Manager: Some things aren’t all that much different. You’d be surprised.

Billy Joe: I guess so. Do you know, like, what caused all this shit—I mean, what brought all those guys back from the dead? Because Rob—he’s this friend of mine—he was—anyway, Rob was like, It’s all a big government conspiracy, and I was like, That’s ridiculous: if it’s a government conspiracy, why did it start in, like, fucking India? And Rob—

Stage Manager: I don’t know. I don’t know what started it; I don’t know what it is.

Billy Joe: Really?

Stage Manager: Really.

Billy Joe: Shit.

Stage Manager: Sorry.

Billy Joe: Does anyone?

Stage Manager: What do you mean?

Billy Joe: Does anyone know what’s going on?

Stage Manager: Not that I’ve heard.

Billy Joe: Oh.

Stage Manager: Look—maybe there’s someplace you’d like to see, someplace you’d like to go…

Billy Joe: Nah, I’m good.

Stage Manager: Are you sure there’s nowhere? Your house, school—

Billy Joe: No, no—I mean, thanks and all, but—it’s cool.

Stage Manager: All right; if you’re sure.

Billy Joe: So… that’s it?

Stage Manager: What else would you like?

Billy Joe: I don't know. Isn't there supposed to be some kinda book, you know, like a record of all the shit I've done?

Stage Manager: That's Santa Claus. Sorry—no, there's nothing like that. All the record you have of what you've done is what you can say about it.

Billy Joe: Huh. So what's it like?

Stage Manager: What's what like?

Billy Joe: Wherever that hall leads.

Stage Manager: Quiet.

Billy Joe: Oh.

(Billy Joe crosses the stage slowly, passing behind the Stage Manager, until he stands as far stage right as he can without leaving the stage.)

Billy Joe: That's it.

Stage Manager: It is.

Billy Joe: Well, no point in delaying the inevitable, right?

Stage Manager: I suppose not.

Billy Joe: Can you tell me one thing—before I go, can you answer one question?

Stage Manager: I can try.

Billy Joe: We're fucked, aren't we?

(The Stage Manager pauses, as if weighing his words.)

Stage Manager: There's always a chance—I realize how that sounds, but there's just enough truth left in it to make it worth saying. Things could turn around. Someone could discover a cure. Whatever's driving the zombies could die out—hell, it isn't even winter yet. A couple weeks of freezing temperatures could thin their numbers significantly. Or someone could be resistant to their bite, to the infection. With seven-plus billion people on the planet, you figure there has to be one person it doesn't affect…

Billy Joe: Do you believe any of that shit?

Stage Manager: No.

Billy Joe: Yeah.

(He exits, stage right.)

Stage Manager: Understand, it's not that I don't want to believe any of it. I want to believe all of it. All that shit, as my young friend would say. But doing so has traveled past the point of hard to the point of no return. No, this—this, I fear, is how the day runs down for the human race. It's how *Homo sapiens sapiens* departs the scene, carried off a bite at a time in the teeth of the undead. If there weren't so much pain, so much suffering in the process, you could almost see the humor in it. This is the way the world ends, not with a bang, and not with a whimper, but with the bleak gusto of a low-budget horror movie.

(The Stage Manager reaches for his flashlight, which he shuts off and takes with him as he rises from his seat and walks to the back of the stage. He is visible against the bulk of the willow, and then the shadows have him. The theater lights come up, revealing the aisles still full of the dead. Men, women, old, young, most wearing the causes of their several demises, they encompass the audience, and do not move.)

Laocöon, or, The Singularity

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1

Later, Dennis would tell his friends about what he had by then decided to call his Discovery—although, secretly, he would remain unsure of his choice of names and wonder if a more accurate one wasn't in order. His act had been more uncovery than discovery, after all, and even more accidental notice, glimpse. But the Glimpse was inadequate, since his brief look had extended into something approaching concentrated study, and because the word in no way conveyed the shock that had rooted his feet to the ground, bag of garbage held suspended over the open can, his vision constricting to the alley, to what crouched between his building and the Greek restaurant beside it. Honestly, Revelation felt most apt, but the word had too many associations of religiosity and fundamentalist hysteria, so he would have to be content with the Discovery.

He would try twice to catch the group's attention. The first time he'd lean forward in his chair and say, "That reminds me: I've got a story you're not going to believe," everyone's attention would be focused on Jack, Melanie and Arthur's two-year-old, who was slamming his die-cast Thomas the Tank Engine on the diner table and shouting, "Blue! Blue! Blue!" Dennis would have to wait until Jack was occupied with dipping his French fries into his macaroni and cheese and the other adults were turning to their lunches before he could lean in again, eyebrows raised as he glanced from side to side, trawling for glances, and announce, "That reminds me: I've got a story you're not going to believe."

Half a dozen replies—all of them through mouthfuls of food—would greet his declaration: a trio of, "Oh?"'s; a, "Hmmph" that might have been a question, might have been a dismissal; a, "Really?"; and a, "What

happened?” He would select this last response—from Amanda, God bless her—to frame his narrative. “What happened was, I was taking out the trash this morning—”

Of course, Simon would interrupt: “My God! The trash, you say?” And of course Dennis would allow Simon his attempted witticism, which was more attitude than actual wit, because it was what Simon did—it was all Simon did, his sole contribution to the intermittent lunches the seven of them held in an effort at keeping in touch. Arthur would snort at Simon’s remark, surprise, surprise, the rest of the table would look at their plates, and then Dennis would continue. “Where the trashcans sit, there’s an alley between my building and Athena’s; the trashcans pretty much form a barrier in front of it. Sometimes, on a Saturday night, you'll hear someone who’s obviously drunk and lost blunder into them—they’re pretty solid, those big, green, industrial containers.”

Simon again: “I had no idea you were such an expert in refuse,” but this time, Melanie would say, “Hush, Simon. Go on, Dennis.”

“Behind the trashcan, in the alley, I saw something.” He would pause, waiting for Simon’s inevitable, “A rat!” but Melanie’s rebuke had momentarily silenced him. The pause would extend three, four, five seconds, just long enough to call attention to itself, as Dennis remembered flipping the lid of the garbage can, drawing back in anticipation of the wave of stench, hefting his past week’s trash (its own study in foulness) up and then pausing as his eyes tracked something in the alley.

Until Melanie prompted, “Dennis?” he would be stuck trying to recall what had drawn his notice in the first place: a shifting in the alley’s shadows, a collection of gleams tracing a shape his eyes couldn't resolve, a series of curves that refused to add up to anything until his mind found its reference point and, like a slide coming into focus on a screen, the random edges cohered into a form. Melanie’s question would make him shake his head and say, “Sorry. Yes, I saw something: a statue. I didn’t know what it was at first, but then I realized someone had left a statue in the alley beside my building.”

“A statue?” Arthur would ask.

Dennis would nod. “Yes, a big one too—about the same size as me.”

By now, Simon’s voice would have returned. “Someone put out a statue with the trash? You're sure it wasn’t Kelly?” Which would draw a sharper, “Simon!” from Melanie but which Simon would shrug off, having decided to play the villain.

Amanda would step in. “What did this statue look like, Dennis?”

If he didn’t pause now, it would only be because he had spent the last half a dozen hours trying to answer that same question. He couldn't call what he’d Discovered unique, because it wasn’t; although the feeling of deep familiarity it evoked in him—really, the sensation was closer to recognition—didn’t stem from his ability to draw a line between any of its features and a precedent. He would try, “Do you remember the Alien from the *Alien* movies?” and see Amanda’s nose already wrinkling. Simon’s barb would be immediate: “So: a gigantic penis with fangs.”

“No,” Dennis would say over the ensuing laughter, “no, it wasn’t a statue of an Alien, but there was something about it that reminded me of the Alien, of Giger’s work in general. The same feeling of seeing things that shouldn't be seen, of what's inside brought out—that obscene sensation, you know?”

“That’s clear as mud.” Simon—on a roll, now.

“Seriously,” Arthur would say, appearing interested (although this was probably for Melanie’s sake), “what did it look like?”

Trying to visualize it, Dennis would begin again. “Chrome—or chrome-painted, because it wasn’t that heavy.”

“I knew it!” Simon would crow. “Where did you put it? Living room or bedroom? My money’s on bedroom.”

“Living room,” Dennis would reply, draining his voice of every last bit of warmth. In fact, the bedroom had been his first choice, but the task of maneuvering the statue any further than his living room had proved too much for the moment.

Arthur would hold the thread of Dennis’s description. “Okay. It’s chrome. What else? You said it looked like an Alien—does it have the same kind of head? A tail?”

Not for the first time, Dennis would wonder what cosmic accident had brought Melanie together with this guy. “No, I didn’t say it looked like an

Alien; I said it reminded me of Giger’s work.”

“Right, sorry, my mistake. So does it have a tail?”

“Yes,” he would say, “quite a long one, actually. It’s—the whole thing is articulated; I don’t mean only the tail, I mean the entire figure. There’s a considerable range of motion.”

(Simon: “You’ve found an enormous doll—sorry, *action figure*.”)

“It’s like a skeleton,” Dennis would go on, “like the frame for something, or the abstraction of it. Everything flows from the spine, which is slightly thicker than the tail and composed of angular vertebrae. They're more angular than human vertebrae. The arms, the legs, are of equal length; they’re slender, and end in five long claws each. There are no hips or shoulders. The limbs join directly to the spine. Its ribcage is dozens of long needles that all curve around an empty space. The head—that’s the hardest part to describe. Attached to the spine, as well—it kind of dangles from the topmost vertebra. The back—the skull, I guess—consists of more needles, only smaller; the face is highly stylized, overlapping metallic plates to suggest forehead and cheeks, a pair of red lenses for eyes. No mouth to speak of, just a space. How’s that?” he would conclude, hoping he sounded as if he cared about Arthur’s answer. Arthur, however, would be distracted by Jack, intent on driving his Thomas train through the remnants of his macaroni; the best he would manage would be a nod to show he'd listened. It would be up to Amanda to say, “Weird. Where do you think it came from? The college?” so voicing the other question that had occupied him since the moment he’d let the trash fall into the container and moved around the garbage cans into the alley. His initial impression, that this was a project for some sculpture major’s senior thesis, or even a prop left over from the science fiction conference they'd held up at SUNY last month, evaporated as he drew closer to the statue, which he approached cautiously, as if it might bolt from him, The work was too fine to be the product of any undergraduate fumblings with a blowtorch. This was Master’s level craft, at least, probably more than that. But what professor or professional would abandon the result of weeks, even months of effort like this? Did his feeling of recognition mean he knew the artist? He wasn’t aware of anyone who'd been at work on anything like this—no one locally, anyway—nor could he link the style to any of his friends or acquaintances. His inability to place

the sculpture, combined with the sensation that he knew this, somehow, was what, after he had circled the piece to the point of dizziness, would prompt his decision to remove it to his apartment.

None of which Dennis would tell Amanda; instead, he'd settle for, “I’m not sure. ‘The sci-fi conference at the college, maybe.”

Fully engaged in narrating his experience, now, he would be ready for more questions. How did you get it up the stairs? What are you going to do with it? He would have answers half-formed. “It was surprisingly light; although it was a bit unwieldy. The tail curves up and over, and it was pretty loose, kept shifting back and forth, altering the balance. Not to mention, the end of it’s quite sharp; I mean, scalpel-sharp. It caught me in the shoulder, before I learned how to maneuver the thing. Broke the skin. Once I got the feel of the figure, it wasn’t that bad.” And, “Do with it? Study it, for starters.”

But the conversation would have moved on, the group lost interest in his Discovery, and though he would make one more attempt to regain the floor, his voice would be drowned out for the second time by one of Jack’s outbursts, after which Dennis would be too annoyed for further effort. He would hear Kelly’s voice complaining about his temper, which would only push his annoyance that much closer to anger.

After lunch was over, the check settled—split by Arthur and Melanie and Amanda, for which he should have been grateful but which only rubbed his poverty in his face—the lot of them standing from the table, drifting outside the diner to the cars that would return them to their lives—all except Dennis, whose car was a distant memory—Melanie would approach him and, as ever, his heart would jump. She would be wearing round glasses, her blond hair long, a maroon sweater and brown corduroy skirt that made her look appealingly retro. He would be sure that she wanted to hear more about the statue, that she had grasped its significance to him. Instead, she would level her best I’m-being-serious-and-compassionate look at him and say, “How are you doing? How are Liam and Brian? Have you seen them?”

The sentences he’d been on the verge of saying would clot on his tongue, and he’d fumble through a set of unanticipated replies. “Fine, fine, the boys are fine; I just saw them last weekend. Liam’s still into snakes, says he wants to be a herpetologist—yes, he actually said the word, ‘herpetologist.’

Brian’s still wild about Nascar. I'll see them tomorrow. Kelly’s agreed to let me take them to the *Star Wars* movie. Just the movie. Yes, it sucks, but until I can afford a better lawyer. No, no progress with Kelly, but I don’t expect any. I mean, she’s made her decision clear.” He would force a smile onto his face and trap it there for the length of their conversation, through Melanie’s expressions of sympathy and regret for the ruin of his marriage, to her latest offer of help if he needed it (which he did but would insist he didn’t), to her offer of a ride to his apartment, which Dennis would decline with a shake of the head and the declaration that he preferred to walk, he needed the exercise, slapping his expansive gut for emphasis. “All right,” Melanie would say, but she would stare at him in that way that said he might as well be made of glass, she could see through to the truth that easily, and which caused his chest to ache as acutely as it had when they were undergrads. He wouldn't know if she intended to follow her stare with a remark that would spear him like a pin through a butterfly (but what butterfly enjoyed its piercing so?), because, shouting, “Mommy! I want MOMMY!” Jack would collide with Melanie’s legs and catch them in a bear hug and that was that, her attention was lost.

Dennis would stand on the diner’s front step as if he were its proprietor, as if he were responsible for the entire town of Huguenot, for maintaining the place they'd all met twenty-five years earlier. Jack into his carseat in the back of her and Arthur's minivan, Amanda answer her cell as she remote-unlocked her Beemer, Simon climb on his ridiculous scooter without the least trace of irony, as if it—and a steady stream of barely-legal girls—could deny the gray that had caused him to shave his hair and beard. Dennis would wave to Les and Ginnie, who had remained conspicuously quiet the length of the meal—Melanie had been saying something about a woman when he arrived, but Les and Ginnie had trailed him by ten seconds, before he could ask for clarification—as they crossed the parking lot to their Subaru. When they had made the left onto Main Street that would take them to the Thruway, he would abandon his post for the trudge to his apartment and the Discovery waiting there for him.

2

The next morning, after *would* had calcified into *did*, Dennis sat on the futon that passed for his living room couch, a cup of strong instant coffee clasped in his hands, and studied the form that occupied the center of the room. Yesterday, he'd thought he'd done a decent job describing the statue; the more he let his gaze roam over its contours, however, the more he realized he'd in no way conveyed what the piece was about.

The arms and legs, for instance, how each of the long bones was not a single, uninterrupted unit, but a cluster of slender tubes braided together, like a weave of arteries and veins. Dennis still hadn't deciphered how the artist had succeeded in making each tube appear so spongy, even with the chrome overlay; it was some kind of texturing effect, obviously, but he couldn't pinpoint the exact technique, one that made the eye feel as if it were pressing against the rubbery surface. He'd hesitated to touch the arms and legs, but they were cool and firm under his fingertips—although his eyes kept insisting that that wasn't right, they could tell the way these things felt; the disjunction was disorienting.

Or the claws at the ends of those limbs, which splayed fat and round, serpentine, their sheen particularly moist to the eye, dry to the touch. Or the vertebrae, each an assortment of angles that somehow managed to suggest a cluster of full lips ripe to open. The individual needles that comprised the rib cage were too thin, too frail. The face—

The face was the one thing that was out of place, its overlapping planes suggesting a Bronze-Age burial mask, and not the visage of this bio-metallic blend. Its lens-eyes were cheap plastic red, held in place by a sloppy application of epoxy; prying them loose would be the work of seconds with a knife, if the metal around them didn't tear. While none of the material(s) of which the statue was composed was especially weighty, the face felt particularly flimsy, aluminum beat paper-thin, perhaps. It was the one part of the sculpture whose joining to the spine was obvious, a clumsy, amateur weld that had scored the smaller basket of needles that composed the skull proper and that helped solidify Dennis's conviction that the face was the work of another, inferior artist and not, as he'd initially assumed, a deliberate juxtaposition, an attempt at a cyber-sphinx (a Giger sphinx?). The face was secondary, not so much an afterthought as an attempt at completing someone else's thought.

He sipped his coffee, frowning at its bitterness, but milk and sugar were extravagances the protracted exercise in masochism he called a budget did not permit. Anyway, he was supposed to be losing weight, trying to shrink the belly that drooped over his pajama bottoms back inside his belt, trying to reclaim his chin and jaw from what Brian had christened his turkey-neck. No, he thought, his gaze returning to the statue—which was, far and away, the most interesting thing in a living room whose eclectic décor owed itself to the limits of his wallet and the offerings at the Salvation Army—no, he hadn't done the piece justice in the slightest. Even its surface, which gave its surroundings back in silver refractions. As for the emotion it stirred in him: initially, he'd understood his response to the sculpture as a series of reactions, curiosity and confusion giving way to surprise, which yielded in turn to recognition, familiarity and something approaching ownership; after a night's sleep, however, he realized that what he'd taken for a number of discrete reactions were all aspects of the same emotion. When he'd seen the statue in the alley, a single feeling had jolted him, *Mine*, which had unfolded throughout the rest of the day in a variety of forms.

How such a response made sense he hadn't yet untangled. It was the kind of question he and Melanie could have batted back and forth for hours, in the days before marriage and motherhood had curtailed their conversations to brief phone exchanges during which she was at best only half-distracted. Kelly had never been interested in those kind of questions. The most he could have expected from her would have been a, "Huh," maybe a glance up from whatever paperwork she was attending to, her pale blue eyes magnified by her reading glasses, her ever-lipsticked mouth pursing as she reminded him that Liam needed to begin his science project and Dennis had said he would help him with it. From their first date, a dinner at Pete's Corner Pub that she'd invited him on and for which she'd paid, Dennis had been struck by his future ex-wife's pragmatism, which threaded through everything she did, which seemed epitomized by the bun into which she coiled her long brown hair. The reason she had taken his Theories of Art class had been to complete a major in Art Therapy. Kelly had been less intrigued by the kind of abstract questions that Dennis could spend class after class obsessing over than she had in art's more practical applications. For her, creativity was a means to an end, an attitude he'd first found

bracing, a refreshing counter to what could seem like the labyrinth of his ideas, but which twelve years of marriage had shown him was crass, constricting. He liked to say Art for Art's Sake was a credo too rich for his blood. Art had to have some use—but the use he meant was a deeply, almost extremely personal one, a means of expanding your inner life. That said, he would gladly take Art for Art's Sake over Kelly's narrow view of art as therapy, a mirror for the self, as a way to build a consulting business, earn a six-figure income, and live in a large house—all of which she had done, taking Dennis along for the ride.

He shook his head, drank more astringent coffee to clear it. The divorce was final; Kelly and he had been apart for a year and a half—closer to two years. There was no point in tormenting himself with the same complaints, the same, stale litany of accusations. Kelly would not have had much if any interest in why a statue Dennis had found (Discovered) in the alley beside his apartment building (he could hear her: "So, junk,") had caused him to feel that it belonged to him as surely as anything he'd made with his own hands—as surely as his sons, truth be known. Unless he could have framed the question in terms that would have mattered to Kelly, as the key, say, to beginning new work, which he was sure he could place in the show Nate Williams was putting on in SoHo in the spring—in which case she would have removed her glasses, folded her hands, and asked him a variation on questions she used with her clients, the set that used famous artworks as glorified Rorschach tests. "Describe what you see as completely as possible." "Focus on a single detail." "Describe that as thoroughly as you can." Simple, obvious questions, designed to elicit clues, patterns, for Kelly to analyze, to call to her client's attention, to lead to further questions.

Dennis knew what individual detail he would select: the statue's tail, coiled around its right side, away from him, and specifically, that tail's tip, still spotted with his blood. Once he had decided to remove the piece to his apartment, he had searched for the best way to lift it, finally settling on a pair of the vertebrae—one above the arms, the other above the legs—grasping them tentatively at first, in case they were even sharper than they appeared, and then more firmly, heaving upwards, fully expecting the statue's weight to be at the very limit of his ability to lift. It hadn't been—just the opposite, in fact: it was light as balsa. The statue practically leapt

off the ground, its limbs collapsing, its tail swinging backwards, Dennis in his surprise slackening his grip, threatening to let the sculpture come crashing down on the alley's pitted surface. He had overcompensated in the opposite direction, almost unbalancing himself in the process. Like a cobra leaping at its prey, the tail had whipped toward him. Sure that it was going to skewer an eye, he'd jerked his head to the side. The point, which was, as he'd said, surgically sharp, had driven through his t-shirt into the skin beneath. Had the piece been composed of a heavier substance—iron or steel, even copper—the wound would have been severe, the weight lending thrust to the strike. As it was, although he had shouted at the pain that burst above his left collarbone, he had maintained his grip on the statue, levering it so that the tail tore free of his skin, and managed it up the stairs to the third floor and his apartment before setting it down to see to his injury.

Which continued to throb, despite his having doused the puncture with rubbing alcohol, smeared antibiotic cream over that, and stuck an oversized band-aid on top. He'd had a tetanus shot three—no, four years ago, when he'd stepped on a rusted shard of metal while trolling through a junkyard; surely, that should still be in effect, shouldn't it? He would inspect the site when he had his shower, which, a glance at the clock-radio showed, he had better take soon. He was supposed to meet the boys for the 1:45 matinee of *Revenge of the Sith*, which gave him little more than an hour to shower, shave, dress, find something to eat, and walk the mostly-uphill mile from his apartment to the theater. For a moment, nostalgia for his old Subaru possessed him, but he washed it away with the rest of his coffee and the admonition that it was good exercise.

His examination of the puncture left him uncertain. The skin around it was pink-verging-on-red, yet the wound itself had scabbed over and wasn't warm to the touch. Probably the accentuated color was normal, the result of increased blood flow to the injured area. The throbbing, though, he didn't like, in no small part because it seemed to be out of sync with his heartbeat. Wasn't that what you were feeling when an injury throbbed, the blood coursing through it? Of course, that blood had to travel a certain distance from his heart, so maybe that explained the delay. Kelly would have ascribed his worry to hypochondria and told him to get over it, which usually had proven sound advice—except for the time it hadn't been and

Dennis had incurred a case of pneumonia that had sent him to Penrose Hospital for three days. You couldn't call your doctor about such things, either, because the nurse would insist he had to see you and that would entail having to take a cab to and from his office down on 208, not to mention the cost of the visit (thank you, high-deductible, part-time-faculty's insurance).

It would keep for a day. He started the shower, hoping for hot water despite the lateness of the hour, and did his best not to look at himself in the full-length mirror on the bathroom door. Dennis hadn't ever been in what you could call the best of shape. When he'd been a teenager, he'd overheard his mother describe him as gangling, a word he hadn't understood but had known from the tone of her voice wasn't flattering; although the memory still rankled, he had been all long skinny arms and even longer legs, with hands and feet he wouldn't grow into until midway through undergrad (to be honest, he'd never completely caught up with his hands), not to mention a chest through whose skin you could count a generous sampling of his ribs if he inhaled and held his breath, and a neck whose Adam's apple looked like an actual lump of fruit caught in his throat. No matter how much he ate, it seemed, he was neither filled or fattened. His father had forced him into running track as a high school junior, but while the 110 sprint had improved his self-confidence and put him more at ease with the body that still felt as if it changed dimensions overnight, the exercise hadn't made any appreciable change to his form.

That had taken the passing of another quarter-century and the gradual calming of his furious metabolism, a slowing that had not been matched by one in his appetite. He wasn't exactly fat. His arms and legs weren't much different than they'd been when he was a kid—the arms a bit thicker, maybe, but that was mostly muscle mass from two decades of sculpting. His chest and stomach were the main culprits, his pectorals sagging into man-boobs, his gut swelling, overflowing his belt; his neck, too: if he tilted his head down, he sprouted a sizable second chin. Over the years, he'd made sporadic attempts at mastering his shape, reigning in his expanding flesh. Once, he'd convinced Kelly to buy a used rowing machine that he'd spent an hour each afternoon using for about a month; another time, he'd tried vigorous walking, up and down the road in front of the house for an

entire summer, and had dropped twelve pounds, but the severe winter that followed had confined him to home, and he'd abandoned that routine, as well. After he'd moved out of the house and into his first apartment, Dennis had resumed walking, driven more by notions of, "I'll show her," than any long-term plans for improving his health. The subsequent loss of his car to his shrinking budget meant that he'd had no choice but to keep walking, but he ate as badly as ever—worse, since there was no one to tell him that two bags of chips, a Milky Way, and an orange soda did not constitute a lunch, no matter how cheap such a combination might be.

He succeeded in avoiding his reflection until after his shower, which threatened hot but only delivered lukewarm running to cold. Stepping out onto the stiffened towel that served for the bathmat, his eyes swept the man across the bathroom from him. When had he gotten so hairy? It wasn't only his chest, which actually pleased him, but his stomach, the tops of his arms, even his back, for God's sake, and his shoulders. When he'd been younger, his skin had been smooth; nor had his father been like this. Some ancestor in the old country, no doubt. It had been a running joke between Kelly and him, which Liam had shared. She had called him, "The Beast," once, after the Disney character, and Liam had picked up on this and been delighted by it, referring to Dennis as, "Beast," and, "Daddy-Beast," in his high, little boy's voice for weeks on end. As he aged, he was growing more Beastly, his skin obscured by a steadily-darkening pelt, even as the bald spot that had been clearing his head for the better part of a decade shifted its clearcutting into high gear. One benefit of the shower: it molded his hair to his head, so that you couldn't see the tufts that stuck up like signs pointing tourists the way to the great plain.

There were times, looking at himself, when Dennis thought he looked like nothing so much as a painting by Lucian Freud, one of those meticulously-rendered canvases whose scrupulous fidelity to the subject's every blemish conveyed a relentless sense of the corruption of the flesh, of fatigue, disease, and fallibility. He'd admired the merciless quality of Freud's vision, had praised it to his Contemporary Art class, but to feel himself described by it was chastening, if not outright depressing. He finished toweling off and hurried out of the bathroom.

3

The movie was a success—not because it was in any way good (it wasn't), but because Liam and Brian were absolutely thrilled with it, watching bad acting and overdone computer effects eyes wide, rapt. Five minutes into the film, a riot of spaceships and explosions crowding the screen, the boys already had forgotten the bucket of popcorn they'd sworn they would eat, and Dennis had had no trouble removing it from between them and indulging in its overbuttered contents. Doing his best not to let Liam and Brian know he was more interested in their wonder at the movie than he was the source of that wonder, he remembered his own amazement at the first *Star Wars*, which had debuted when he was five years older than Liam, but which he had sat through every other week that summer, every bit as awestruck as his sons were now. He and his best friend at the time, Joe Cramer, had argued the relative merits of Han Solo and Darth Vader over pitchers of Joe's mom's iced-tea, which they drank sitting on the Cramer back porch—screened in and cool—drawing on pads of graph paper Mr. Cramer smuggled out of IBM for them. Joe wasn't good at people, all of whose faces tended towards the same oval approximation, but he'd discovered a real talent at reproducing the space ships, droids, and armored characters that crowded the film they quoted to each other constantly. Dennis, who at fourteen could draw his friend's mother well enough for her to ask him for the picture, which she hung on the Cramers' refrigerator with a show of pleasure that his own parents never had displayed, found the planes and angles of Darth Vader's helmet-mask, the contours of the Millennium Falcon, more of a challenge, and had to settle for renditions of the human protagonists rather than the exact copies of the imaginary technology Joe filled page after page with. (Joe had become an engineer, he'd heard sometime in the last ten years, and was working out west for someone like Boeing, now.)

Joe was of the opinion that Han Solo had the advantage over Darth Vader, hands down. Han was a smuggler, so he got to break the rules, but it wasn't like he was evil or anything. Darth Vader had the red lightsaber, true, and a decent ship, but even with its angled wings, there was no way his TIE fighter compared to the Falcon, which was quite possibly the coolest

spaceship ever. Besides, Joe said, everyone knew that Darth Vader wore that heavy mask because Obi-Wan Kenobi had knocked him into a volcano; it was like, a life-support system because the guy had been so badly injured. Dennis tended to agree with Joe's judgement, but there were moments he found himself thinking that it wouldn't be all bad to wear a mask like Vader's: you'd be mysterious, hidden, your face safely unreadable behind its black casing. When your mother asked you what you were really going to do with your life, and please don't tell her drawing comic books, she wouldn't be able to see your brow lowering, your mouth flattening, and so couldn't tell you not to give her a Look—which, if your father were around, would lead to him demanding why you were giving your mother a Look, a question to which there was no good answer.

Now here he was, watching the very story Joe had narrated to him all those years ago. How much more suggestive his brief summary had been, evoking scenes of fierce lightsaber combat on the lip of a volcano full of red-orange lava, than what played across the screen in front of him: Darth Vader as a self-indulgent man-child, instead of the shadowy figure he and Joe had imagined, an assassin wrapped in swirling black robes. "And bald," Joe had declared, "he has to be bald." In consultation with Joe, Dennis had drawn a portrait of the Dark Lord of the Sith—which Mrs. Cramer had shudderingly declared very menacing—which they had mailed to both Lucasfilm and Marvel Comics, then publishing the *Star Wars* comic. Each had replied with its own bland, pleasant form letter.

It was funny, he reflected during a stretch of dialogue, how much of his childhood fantasy life had been occupied by masked figures: Spider-Man and Captain America, yes, but so many villains who hid their faces not to guard their identities, but because their faces had been damaged, ruined, usually by something they had done, some error they'd committed. Doctor Doom, the dedicated enemy of the Fantastic Four, had been like that, as had another villain, Annihilus, who for some reason had made a profound impression on Dennis. One of the Fantastic Four's other nemeses, Annihilus was an alien who inhabited the Negative Zone, a dimension of negative energy that the heroes could access through a kind of airlock in their headquarters. Devoted to the principle of anti-life, Annihilus sported enormous batwings, purple and green armor, and a small yellow tube that

attached to his armor at the neck and was the source of his power. His face was green, a series of overlapping plates that Dennis thought resembled a metallic locust. Had Jack Kirby designed Annihilus? He must have. The villain's appearance suggested his strong lines and genius for baroque technology too much to be the product of anyone else's vision.

The memory of Annihilus, his blank eyes, his mouth open to hurl some bombastic threat at the FF, summoned another face, the Discovery's, with its red plastic eyes and layered plates. The coincidence of design was probably just that, accidental, but his pulse quickened, anyway. Was that what whoever had added the face to the statue had seen in it, an echo of a comic book monster? Dennis couldn't make the comparison, himself. Annihilus had been heavy, bulky, where the Discovery was sleek, even graceful. But the possibility that this was what the second sculptor (the one he had started calling the Amateur) had had in mind would not leave him. Through the rest of the movie, as the narrative moved toward the moment Darth Vader's mask would be lowered onto his blistered face, Dennis saw the statue's face next to a panel from some long lost issue of *The Fantastic Four*, Kelly's therapy questions sounding in his ears. Focus on a single detail. Describe it as thoroughly as you can. What do you think of when you look at it? Sitting at the desk in his childhood room, laying sheet after sheet of onionskin typing paper over pages of comic books to trace the faint forms visible through it. Stapling pages together and showing them to his friends with his best attempt at nonchalance. (No point showing his parents, unless he were eager for indifference.) Inventing heroes and villains, hodge-podges of the characters whose escapades he followed every month, and taping pages of their pencilled figures to the wall above his desk. Winning first prize for his age group in the art show at the first comic book convention he attended, age sixteen, and receiving the award from John Byrne, then at the height of his success in reinvigorating *The Fantastic Four*, Byrne shaking his hand, looking at Dennis through his glasses, and telling him to stick with it, this was good stuff. Taking the bus back upstate that night feeling anointed, his future laid out before him in fire.

After the closing credits, there was time for a slice of pizza and a coke at Napoli's, two doors down in the same plaza as the theater. Liam, his round face glowing, couldn't stop talking about the movie, asking Dennis what

he’d thought of this scene and that scene, more so he could relive them than because he was interested in his father’s opinion, which Dennis had sense enough to recognize and keep to himself. Brian kept his right thumb close to his bottom lip, apparently more troubled by the film’s darker moments, and Dennis wondered if the movie had been too grim for his younger son. But Liam cajoled his brother, telling him it hadn’t been that scary, there had been all kinds of cool things in it, R2D2 zapping those evil droids, that had been awesome, hadn't it? and Brian rallied under his big brother’s encouragement. Dennis wasn’t sure Brian was completely convinced, but Kelly was due any minute, and there wasn’t time for him to talk Brian through whatever might be bothering him. That was all he needed, Kelly to show up while he was consoling his son about the inappropriate movie he’d taken him to. At the very least, it would earn a snide remark, at worst, a lecture that his ex-wife would have no trouble delivering in front of his sons in the middle of the pizzeria. He would have to trust Liam to reassure Brian through any difficulties tonight.

When she walked into Napoli’s, Kelly was civil, though her eyes took in his wrinkled shirt and jeans and she ran her hands over her violet pantsuit’s jacket, as if to reassure herself that his slovenliness wasn't contagious. Her hair was down, cut shortish but not too much so; she seemed more made-up than usual. Denis hugged and kissed his sons, Liam squirming, “*Da-ad*,” Brian acquiescing, “Love you, Daddy,” and then the boys were gone, off in their mother’s Sequoia and home to her four-bedroom, two-and-a-half-bathroom on a ridge overlooking Frenchman’s Mountain. It would be another seven days until Dennis saw them again. He would call every other night, as the lawyers had agreed he could, but the boys were still too young to talk with him in any meaningful way. Calling them was something he did to prove a point to Kelly.

The walk back up Main Street was shot through with melancholy at having lost Liam and Brian, again, which never grew any easier, the way you would think it would have to—he felt as raw as he had the first time he’d surrendered them to their mother. Then, Liam had been openly tearful, Brian mostly confused and glad to see Mommy. He supposed he should be grateful that Liam’s eyes had remained dry, while Brian seemed to have accepted the change in family arrangement with relatively little fuss. As

ever, his gloom brought with it dull anger at Kelly, for forcing this situation on all of them. Things had been fine as they were, with her as principle breadwinner, him supplementing her earnings with what he made adjuncting classes at the college and selling the occasional piece, which he would have done more of if he'd been able to spend more time in his studio —but Kelly had dumped all the childcare responsibilities in his lap, Whatever after-school activities the boys wanted to take part in; whichever friend(s) they wanted to have visit them; whatever doctor or dentist's appointment they had (Liam's teeth were cavity-prone; Brian was asthmatic), Dennis was responsible for transportation, supervision, and consultation. He didn't begrudge the boys his time—he'd been thrilled at their progress in soccer, shouting from the sidelines with as little self-consciousness as his own father had shown; he'd enjoyed driving a carful of them and their friends into town for ice cream; he'd been surprised at his ability to navigate medical emergencies—it was just it was unreasonable to expect him to be able to complete a new sculpture in anything approaching a timely fashion when Liam needed someone to practice kicking the soccer ball with and Brian had to be reminded to use his inhaler, the pollen count was high today. To state, as Kelly had with growing frequency, that his duties to his sons were an evasion he was using to justify avoiding his work —during the worst of their fights, she had added, "Or your failure as an artist"—and to tell him, to dictate to him, that either he started selling more of his pieces or he needed to think seriously about finding a full-time job, to deliver an ultimatum for his contribution to the household budget—and to sugarcoat it by saying that she was doing this for his sake, that he needed to assume greater responsibility for the family—as if he wasn't the one cheering Liam or Brian down the field, or coordinating ice cream choices for half a dozen boys, or listening to the pediatrician presenting the pros and cons of different bronchodilators—his rage twisted within him, writhing like a knot of vipers.

Fueled by his anger, which never seemed to diminish, either, he had race-walked up Main Street to its intersection with Route 32. Diagonally across from him was Huguenot Video, where Dennis had been manager for less than two months, crammed in the middle of a plaza that included a pizzeria, a pharmacy, and a deli. Lungs burning from exertion, heart drumming in his

ears (the wound on his shoulder pounding, too, still keeping its own pulse), Dennis stood contemplating crossing the street to check in and make sure no crises had arisen since Friday. He grinned, savagely. Kelly had gotten her wish, after all. He'd had to find a second job to pay his expenses, more considerable than he'd estimated and which had forced him to surrender his car. There had been a chance he could find a position teaching in one of the private schools across the river, but the prospect of playing underpaid nursemaid to the spoiled offspring of the self-important rich had repelled him. Those kinds of jobs, he knew, took all you had to give them, and all you had to give your other projects, besides; they would leech your creativity for their own nourishment. Better a position he could leave behind him the second he walked out the front door, which had meant the video store—and which had possessed the additional benefit of embarrassing Kelly. He could picture her cringing at the prospect of him working a minimum wage job, the kind of employment suited to college students and those bereft of college diplomas. No matter what she might plead to the contrary, she would hate their friends—who were basically her friends—asking Dennis where the new Tom Cruise film was, handing him their video selections, paying him their late fees. She would project her discomfort onto the boys, claim that she was concerned about the effect their father's humiliation would have on them, but you didn't need a degree in Art Therapy to see through to her true feelings.

He decided against dropping in on the store; any crises would keep until nine thirty tomorrow morning; and continued along Main Street, which dipped toward downtown and his apartment building. A steady stream of cars, weekenders returning to the City after a quick jaunt to the country, eased up the street. His anger was sagging, his melancholy subsiding. Rage and nostalgia, the twin strands of his emotional DNA, a double-helix runged by sour memories. As they receded, depression thick and black as spent motor oil seeped into their places. He might as well be a teenager again, the patterns of his emotional weather had altered so little in the intervening decades. Kelly had accused him of melodrama, of self-indulgence—the echo of the disgust in her voice reviving his anger enough to burn him momentarily free of depression. His breathing, which had cooled, and his heart, which had slowed from gallop to canter, both

quickened—not as much as they had straining him up the hill here, just sufficient to propel his feet that little bit faster. His shoulder was pounding worse than ever—the sensation was more unpleasant, strange, than painful, but his skin felt hot beneath his shirt, which was cause for concern if not worry. He would inspect it again when he returned home.

In the meantime, he had to start thinking about his class on Tuesday—Art Criticism—for which he'd have to plan a lesson tonight, since his shift at the video store tomorrow was twelve hours (one of the perks of being manager: you could construct the schedule so that you put in three long days and one short morning, and then you were free), and after a long day of it he wouldn't be much good for setting up a game of checkers, let alone a lecture and discussion on Lessing's *Laocöon* with accompanying slides. Dennis didn't find the essay especially difficult, but the course was a summer class composed of a wide range of students of varying abilities, to put it kindly. What he wanted was to lead them towards what he found the most interesting aspect of the essay, something that had leapt out at him the first time he'd read it, in his own undergraduate Art Crit class here. Lessing was interested in differentiating the visual arts from the narrative arts, in arguing that painting and sculpture achieve their effects in different ways than novels and stories do theirs. Fair enough, it was an argument for which Dennis had more than a little sympathy. Yet to make his case, the guy chooses an ancient sculpture whose significance is deeply caught up with narrative, the representation of Laocöon, priest of Troy, who angered Athena by seeing through the Greeks' ploy with their gigantic horse; in response to which she sent massive snakes slithering out of the ocean to kill him and his two sons. Damaged and incomplete, the statue showed Laocöon and his sons struggling against the tangling coils. Without the narrative context, the sculpture's import was diminished—not fatally, but enough that you had to say narrative was wound around its significance, its signification.

He would have to be careful, however; already, he'd learned that his love for highlighting the contradictions and inconsistencies in the readings he assigned left anywhere from one- to two-thirds of the class confused if not lost. Several of the students had become regulars at his office hours, appearing in the doorway of the office he shared with seven other adjuncts,

their faces bent in frowns. One student had complained to the Chair (Elaine wouldn't tell him who, but he thought he knew), who had reassured the student of her absolute faith in Dennis's competency, then called Dennis and interrogated him for the better part of an hour about his pedagogical practices.

Yet something else he could chalk up to the divorce. He paused at the Corner of Main and Blank, while a pickup towing a horse trailer rolled down Blank's steep slope, then hurried across the crosswalk. Prior to the last couple of years, he'd prided himself on his teaching, on his ability—his talent—for introducing his students to challenging, often difficult ideas, in a way that allowed them to exit his class with an appreciation for the major intellectual currents in Western Art. His method had been Socratic, a series of provocative questions that led smoothly one to the next, which he thought out the night before and sometimes morning of his class. He had a skill at thinking on his feet, adapting or improvising his next question from the last response, that had frustrated Kelly, who had to script and revise her therapy sessions several days in advance. Dennis's student evaluations had been strong enough for Elaine to tell him that, if he would finish his MFA, the next time the department had a tenure-track opening, she could practically guarantee he'd be their choice; former students still dropped in during his office hours to discuss their projects for other professors with him. Since his marriage had begun to buckle, though, and then to collapse, he'd found his ability to frame useful questions for his students hindered; although he felt sure he was asking the same things he'd been asking for years—or close enough—all that greeted him was silence, confused looks. Confident in his abilities, Dennis hadn't committed his lessons to paper in any but the most cursory of ways, jotting down a word or two to get him started, maybe one question if he thought that the specific phrasing he'd arrived at was important—a decision he regretted. Unable to provoke his classes to meaningful responses, he'd fallen back on lectures, largely-unprepared monologues that wrapped significant information in digression and opinion. If his knack for teaching had been another casualty of the divorce—and if he didn't want to lose his classes, a prospect he dreaded—he would have to prepare his lectures, outline his remarks, formulate questions he could give the students to discuss in small groups. He could

mention Lessing’s contradictions—well, the tensions in the essay—but only at the end, after he’d insured the class understood the essay’s point.

It was the kind of task Melanie could have helped with, he thought as he dug his keys out of his jeans pocket and unlocked the outer door to the large, converted house whose former attic he occupied. Before Arthur, before Jack, he had consulted with her about this kind of stuff regularly, which had bothered Kelly for years—until Melanie and Arthur’s marriage, she hadn't been comfortable with Dennis’s long conversations with his old college friend, even if the vast majority of them were conducted via phone. She had remarked on several occasions how happy Dennis was every time he got off the phone with Melanie, which was true—talking with her made him feel lighter, unknotted—and he’d had to reassure her, gently dispute the worry her statement inferred and affirm his love for her. (Privately—there was no sense in dwelling on what had never been, was there?) He trudged up the stairs to his apartment, past the ever-present thud of heavy metal that vibrated the door of the first-floor apartment, through the perpetual odor of frying onions and cardamom that clouded the second floor landing, up to his place.

A year, and he hadn’t learned the location of the light switch. He closed the door and ran his hand over the wall to his right. He flipped the switch, and the Discovery leapt out of the shadows into shining definition. Against the background of his living room, the statue looked more real, more present, as if Dennis’s futon-couch, milk-crate bookshelves, and pre-millenial TV and VCR had been crudely painted on a canvas backdrop and the sculpture were a more finely-crafted prop. He stood, taking in the arch of its spine, the angles of its arms and legs, the curve of its ribs, a single word, Mine, rolling through him like thunder through mountains. He was surprised at the possessiveness the thing continued to evoke in him, an only slightly more mature version of the emotion that had gripped him when, at the age of eleven, he had secured a copy of issue 5 of *The Fantastic Four* for a steal at the Stormville Flea Market. He had given that comic pride of place on his bookcase, carefully propping it against the row of books on the top shelf, so that he could see its cover while he lay in bed, or if he turned around from his desk. His shoulder was forgotten, or at least, put to one side, as he realized that he could smell the statue, a barely-perceptible odor that mixed

equal parts heady spray paint and pungent turpentine. He inhaled deeply. He wasn’t any calmer, not exactly, but the sharpness of the smell made him feel more focused, more directed. He wasn’t sure if that was why he did what he did next, but it might have been part of it. Crossing the space to the sculpture in two strides, Dennis reached out one hand, took the face in his fingers, and pulled. It came off easily, in one piece, with no real noise at all. The face had barely any weight to speak of; it might have been made of foil paper. He let it flutter to the floor. It clashed tinnily on the wood. He walked around the statue to the futon, shedding his coat along the way. Lowering himself onto the mattress, he reached for the drawing pad and mechanical pencil on top of the milk crate beside it. He flipped past hurried sketches for projects he had little interest in, till he arrived at a blank sheet of paper. Without pause, he began tracing the contours of his Discovery, approximating it in black and white. When he had it on the page, he started to test ideas for the new face he was going to make for it.

4

Dennis continued to sketch throughout the following day’s shift at the video store. His initial round of drawings had kept him up past two a.m., with only brief interruptions for the bathroom and a quick supper of warm-beans-on-white-bread. He had shuttled back and forth between possible features for the sculpture’s face and more detailed reproductions of its arms, its hands, its tail, searching for something in the piece as it was that might lead him to how it would be, building possible faces out of the angles in the statue’s spine, the overlapping tubes of its arms, then splicing elements of those obsessional designs into composite ones. Nothing satisfied him, which (he'd kept telling himself) was fine. He was at the beginning of a journey that might last weeks; patience would be a necessary provision.

He’d drawn eyes that were narrow, reptilian, eyes round as birds’, eyes that were empty metal holes. He'd set the eyes close together, far apart, on either side of the head. He’d made the head wide as an anvil, slender as a reed, pointed as a hypodermic. He'd crowded possibilities onto the page, exhausting every last inch of whiteness before moving onto the next sheet. His electric pencil sharpener had shrieked every five minutes.

He hadn’t felt this eager to proceed with a project in—the last time he’d been this overcome with something must have been, what, five years ago? Brian had been almost two; he remembered because all their friends had remarked that Brian was entering the Terrible Twos ahead of schedule. Most boys waited until they were well into their third year to release their inner monsters, but in that, as in many other, happier things, his younger son had been precocious. During one of Brian’s more extravagant performances, which he had put on for the benefit of the patrons of the diner to which Dennis had taken Liam and Brian to meet Melanie for lunch, a middle-aged woman seated at the table next to theirs had said, “He’s got the devil in him, that one,” a series of tumblers had snapped into place in Dennis’s head, and, even as he was jostling Brian on his leg, hushing him with no real success—Liam rolling his eyes; Melanie putting on her best sympathetic look—Dennis had retrieved a felt-tip pen from his jacket pocket and outlined what was to be his next six months’ work on a pair of napkins.

Kelly had barely concealed her resentment at the time he'd required to realize that outline, nor had she been happy with the result, a half-dozen statues—three busts and three full-sized figures—of a somewhat-stylized boy who was obviously Brian, each plaster form hollowed and that space filled by a small, metal devil. In fact, Kelly had been outright angry with him, accusing Dennis of demonizing and exploiting their son. “You should try understanding him,” she had said as she surveyed his studio, her face red, “instead of indulging yourself.” He supposed he should have anticipated such a reaction, but he had been engaged in the series for so long, any emotional inspiration had long since been absorbed by the technical challenges the set posed. He’d looked at the bust of his son, its face contorted in a yell, the skull open in a jagged gap and a spindly devil leering out, and his principal concern was whether the rust-red of the devil outweighed the milky-white of its surroundings. The statue of Brian with his arms outflung, his head tossed back, the center of his chest a cave occupied by a capering devil whose outspread arms extended forward, had been a problem in balance. His explanations to Kelly as he had followed her (and the boys, he recalled) out of his studio that all artists used personal material, she knew that, had sounded rote even to him, his apologies half-

hearted because he’d still been riding the wave that had carried him through these pieces, the total involvement he’d known as a child laboring over the panels of his own comic books, that had always infused his most successful efforts. Kelly had given him the cold shoulder for a week after that; although she hadn't had any trouble cashing the checks that had come when he'd sold the sculptures more quickly and for more money than anything he’d made wrought before. Altogether, they’d earned him thirty-three thousand dollars, which he’d dutifully turned over to Kelly, except for a couple of hundred he’d reserved for himself. What had he spent that on? Art books, most likely—that Kiefer collection, or Schama’s book on Rembrandt (whose covers he’d yet to open for more than a skim).

Morning behind the video store’s counter was slow enough for Dennis to fill half a roll of blank register tape with assorted drawings: of the Discovery in whole, in pieces, in very small pieces; geometrically; in light and shade; as its simplest lines; of possible faces for it, individual features of those faces; patterns and textures that might find a place somewhere in it; of his own face, frowning, angry, crying, smiling like a lunatic; of details from the Discovery grafted onto his face, his eye sockets empty, his cheeks traversed by branching veins, his mouth a mass of writhing tubes. He used one of the ballpoint pens they kept in plastic SUNY Huguenot cup behind the counter, and the blue ink rolled from its tip in blobs and half-lines, smudged by and onto the edge of his hand. He deliberately didn’t leave art supplies at this job. A pad of scrap paper and a number 2 pencil, hard, would present too much of a temptation to put off re-stocking the returns, cleaning the windows, vacuuming the carpet. He didn’t want to spend his time hiding in the nominal breakroom, using what meager authority his position granted him to sneak in an hour or two of art. It was a matter of discipline, boundaries, of building his life more structure than it had had since before Liam was born—which, he hoped, would carry over to the rest of his existence. When there was a difficult customer, a question about late fees, a film that hadn’t played, a missing DVD, he did his best to be right there beside the other employees, ready to step in should that prove necessary, which it rarely did. But he thought they noticed and appreciated his presence.

Today, though—today, he'd overslept and awakened with a head full of possibilities the numbers on the clock were not going to let him scribble down before he had to rush out the door. In the shower, he'd traced a couple of them on the walls with a soapy finger. He would have to wait—maybe he could run back home over his lunch break. But once he'd started the register, logged in, counted the drawers, and checked in the four movies from the drop box, he'd found himself doodling on the countertop. Rubbing the ink off with his other hand, Dennis had dug a roll of register tape out of the box under the counter, tore the taped end free, and begun drawing. For inspiration, he'd slotted a film into the in-store DVD player, *Species*, another Giger creation. The movie hadn't improved since he'd last viewed it. As far as he was concerned, the filmmakers should have spent more time showing their monster and less on their putative plot, whose every-woman-craves-a-child paranoia was so blatant, even Dennis, usually painfully dense about such matters, found it obvious. Within minutes of seeing this alien appear, Dennis's pen was tracing overlong heads with flat faces, phallic tongues and tentacles, branching veins and geometric tattoos. It was the risk you took, that the other artist's style would infiltrate yours, colonize your ability, transform you into a smudged copy of them. Hadn't that already happened with Giger? How many of the aliens you encountered in movies, TV shows, comic books were little more than his original Alien, living on in its latest avatar? He x'd out the last foot or so of the tape and unspooled more of it. He let the film run through the credits, then replaced it with a Woody Allen movie, *Husbands and Wives*.

At one, Lena arrived to spell him for lunch. She saw the loops of paper curling across the counter and, picking up one coil to examine it, said, "What's this?"

"It's for something I'm working on," Dennis said, still drawing.

"I didn't know you were an artist." She slid the tape from hand to hand, as if it were a length of film she were inspecting. Lena was twenty, overweight in a way Dennis found more sexy than he wanted to admit about someone young enough to be his daughter. She was a study in piercings: ears (of course), eyebrow, lip, tongue, he thought nipple but wasn't sure, bellybutton, and, she'd informed him in answer to his question of how many piercings she had, places she couldn't show him. Besides the rings

and dumbbells that adorned her skin, she favored bulky jewelry: a metal-studded dog collar and bracelets, oversized, poorly-fashioned rings, and tight clothing, t-shirts for bands he'd never even heard of that stretched tight across her chest and rode up above her plump stomach, the ring in her navel, low-rider jeans with worn knees and frayed cuffs, black high-tops whose laces she left untied. He tried to act, if not paternal, disinterested towards her. She said, "These are pretty cool."

"Thanks," Dennis said, capping the pen and stuffing it in the front pocket of his khakis. (He liked to work with the same instrument for as long as possible; it was a superstition he'd never managed to rationalize.) He spun the paper back onto the spool, out of Lena's hands.

"What's it for?" she asked. "Are you taking a class?"

"I'm a sculptor," Dennis said. "When I'm not here. This is what I do to pay the bills."

"Awesome. Have you ever had anything, you know, on display anywhere?"

"Not for a while."

He thought that would be the end, but after lunch at the deli a couple of doors down (a bologna and cheddar sandwich he was forced to buy because in his hurry to be at the store on time he'd forgotten to pack a lunch—and dinner; he'd have to pay for that, too, get a slice of pizza at the pizzeria at the other end of the plaza) and another half-hour of furious scribbling in the breakroom, until he told himself that was enough, he would have to give it a rest while Lena was there, she raised the subject of the drawings again. "What's your sculpture supposed to be a sculpture of?"

"It's—I'm—" For a moment, his tongue deserted him.

"I thought it might be some kind of alien, but maybe it's a robot. Or a cyborg. Or am I completely off-base? Is it, like, a demon or something, a monster?"

"Yes," he said, grinning to show the joke.

"What? Oh, so it's whatever you want it to be, that sort of thing?"

Although Dennis had compared the Discovery to Giger's Alien, he hadn't thought of it as representing an alien *per sé*. Truth to tell, he hadn't thought of it as representing anything. The statue was a challenge in design, an

opportunity. He felt it, the way he hadn't felt any work, his or someone else's—maybe ever, but he wasn't sure what it was.

So he was surprised to hear himself answering, "It's a predator. A virus."

"Like a computer virus? You know, a symbol for one?"

"Not exactly," he said. Where was this coming from? "It's viral, I should have said."

"A viral predator?"

"No. Yes. It's—" he held his hands open. "It's just something I'm doing."

Lena nodded. "Maybe it's something people can upload their consciousnesses into, after the Singularity."

For about a month, since she'd read an article about it online, Lena had been obsessed with the Singularity, which Dennis hadn't heard of but which he learned from her was the term for the moment when computers were supposed to exceed their creators, became conscious or something approximating it, which apparently was inevitable and would open up all manner of possibilities for human beings as increasingly sophisticated computers would allow people to leave their bodies behind and migrate to virtual realms. To Dennis, it sounded like little more than the latest wrapper for a desire for transcendence that stretched back to the beginning of the species. He had no doubt that computers were improving—hadn't Big Blue beaten Kasparov?—but to achieve sentience, with its mix of conscious and unconscious, all its bodily entanglements? As for uploading—Lena's preferred word—the mind into a space where fantastic things would be possible, that seemed so much escapism—if not outright narcissism—it was almost painful in its naked longing. What had he said to her? "*Dungeons and Dragons* was cheaper."

Lena was wearing a black lace bra that was clearly visible through her thin white t-shirt. Dennis bit down on the sarcasm warping his mouth and said, "Could be."

Despite the afternoon's distractions, Lena's proximity and a steady flow of customers, Dennis filled another yard of the register tape. He wasn't any closer to a solution but that was fine. It would come to him. He might be able to incorporate the tape into his display of the completed Face: run it

along a wall, the pages from his sketchpad beneath it, with the Face suspended in front of them, hanging on wires or supported by a stand. Or should he include the statue? He was working toward the moment he would fit his design to the Discovery and weld it into place. The statue was integral to what he was fashioning for it. The question was more, Could he not include the sculpture? and the answer was, Absolutely not.

But what if the artist who'd fashioned it (the one he'd started referring to as the Master) appeared to demand his work's return? Yes, he'd abandoned it—frustrated with his inability to finish it, no doubt—to the efforts of the Amateur—who must have been similarly frustrated—but there would be nothing like Dennis succeeding where the Master had failed to renew the previous artist's connection to the work. Appeals to the community of artists, the conversation of ideas, complementary efforts—let alone notions of quotation, sampling—would fly out the window the second reputation—and, more to the point, money—became involved. Wouldn't that be perfect: his first significant project in years—since the Brian pieces, really—ruined by the intrusion of someone who hadn't known enough not to discard brilliant work? Wouldn't Kelly like that. He could hear her, "What were you thinking using another artist's work without their permission? What did you expect?"

Yet his anxiety failed to gather sufficient steam to impede the roll of his pen over the paper. Instead, it ran into that conviction of ownership, that possessive, *Mine*, standing in his mind like an enormous stone monument, and dissipated around it in eddies and swirls. He had a suspicion that was more like a belief that if he said the entire thing, Discovery and Face, was his, no one would come forth to challenge him.

Perhaps the more pressing question was Lena's, "What is it a statue of?" or rather, his answers to it. Without thinking, he had identified it as a predator, as a virus, which he'd qualified to the adjective viral, which hadn't clarified matters appreciably. There was enough to the sculpture's design, the arched back with its angular vertebrae, the tail with its scalpel tip, to warrant describing it as the representation of some kind of predator—which his comparison to Giger's work had acknowledged. Viral, though: he thought the association might owe itself to the statue's geometry, which was not unlike that of viruses he'd seen electron microscope photographs of. They

were organic machines, at the border, as he understood it, of what was alive and what was not. Maybe his response meant he saw the Discovery as a liminal figure. Or maybe he'd said, "Viral" and intended another word altogether, a habit to which he was prone, and which had irritated Kelly to no end.

Not until an hour before closing did Dennis think about the next day's class, Lessing's essay. Panic jolted him, made him roll up the register tape, by now showing the pink edging that announced its end was near, and stuff it in his jacket pocket, cap his pen. As he and Lena dealt with a late influx of customers, did the nightly vacuuming, prepared to cash out, Dennis inventoried possibilities. Maybe he should call in sick, buy himself until Friday. No, that was an excuse he'd abused last year, until the chair had called him to ask pointedly if he needed a ride to the doctor's, because she'd noticed he kept missing his classes, and wanted to be sure he wasn't seriously unwell. The call had been Dennis's chance to confess, admit to the smoking rubble of his life post-divorce, post loss of Liam and Brian, but he hadn't—really, how could he have?—instead, he'd played along and invented a series of symptoms he'd recounted in a voice rapidly more hoarse, with accompanying cough. He wasn't sure if the chair had believed any of it—she'd known his divorce was recent, had separated from her own husband not that long ago so must have some notion of what Dennis was undergoing—and might have saved himself the effort. On the other hand, he'd poured himself into the role, and she hadn't been completely unconvinced. Either way, a sick day was not an option.

Nor was delaying the lecture, putting it off for another class, another week; not unless he wanted to spend the additional time it would require for him to rearrange the rest of the syllabus. Anyway, what could he give his students to do, instead? It was still early in the session to turn them loose writing their own reviews and criticism—he'd experimented with that last year, too, moving what was usually the end of the semester project forward to well before the midterm as another way to relieve the pressure bearing down on him from every direction. It had freed him for one class, only to confine him to his apartment for the three days it had taken him to read and respond thoroughly to the thirty-five papers he'd received, an ordeal that had left him writing half of what he usually said over the rest of the course

on his students' pages. Whatever his short-term stresses, in the long term, keeping the review/criticism assignment for the final made more sense.

By the time he and Lena had turned out the lights and locked up for the night, Dennis had reached the decision that had been waiting for him from the beginning: he would have to wing it, do the best he could. He had the slide of the statue Lessing had used for his essay in his office, along with a copy of the *Aeneid* he'd checked out of the school library, the relevant passage tagged with a yellow sticky-note. In one of the boxes under his bed, there was a handout he'd prepared on Lessing's life and works, which he could photocopy in the morning. Discussing the slide, passage, and handout would fill half the class, minimum, after which he could break the students up into small discussion groups and give them simple questions. How does Lessing argue poetry works? How does Lessing argue sculpture and painting work? Do you think Lessing is right about poetry? Do you think Lessing is right about sculpture and painting? If he were feeling daring, if his subdivision of the class (which he accomplished through assigning each student a number from one to seven and then sending them off to sit with their fellows) yielded a particularly able group or two, he could ask them to apply Lessing's ideas to film and TV. Depending on the quality of the discussion—who was he kidding? on the existence of discussion—he could offer them his ideas about Lessing's applicability to comic books, a topic on which he'd written an undergraduate essay he still judged one of the best things he'd ever written and to which he hadn't surrendered hope of returning, expanding, and publishing.

Yes, he told himself as he walked down Main Street, hands jammed into his jacket pockets against the air's unexpected chill, he would talk to them about that long-ago paper, and use that conversation to springboard back into it. He would complete the Discovery, and he would revise and publish that essay, and on those twin foundations he would construct a new future, a better one than the one that had him in its coils and was slowly squeezing the life out of him.

5

The class was not a complete disaster. In fact, for the first half of it, Dennis was on track to have one of the better sessions he'd had post-divorce. He began with the slide, dimming the lights and switching on the projector. The screen over the blackboard glowed, the ancient statue's white violence filling it. A half-dozen students sat up straighter, their attention caught by what they were seeing. "The Laocöon," Dennis said, gazing up at the picture. "Pliny the Elder, a first century AD Roman writer, credits it to three sculptors on the Greek island of Rhodes: Agesander, Polydorus, and Athenodorus. About whom, we know nothing, except that Agesander was alive between 42 and 21 BC, so the statue is first century BC. If it isn't a Roman copy; although, even if it were, it would still be pretty old. The statue was unearthed in 1506; Michelangelo saw it, and there's evidence that the sculpture's dynamism influenced his work. How much influence is subject to debate—he was already moving in certain directions before he encountered the statue; at the very least, seeing it reinforced his decision to embrace a more dramatic style. Currently, you can see the piece in the Vatican.

"What does the statue show? At its center is Laocöon, priest of Apollo, the god of the sun, art, and archery. Apollo's priests were supposed to remain celibate, but then as now, such rules were difficult to live by. Laocöon broke his vow and the result was twin boys, Antiphus and Thymbraus. Apollo was not happy about this. Laocöon also had the misfortune to be born a Trojan, who would lose their famous war with the Greeks. In fact, the Trojans would lose the war because they'd been duped, tricked by the Greeks. The Greeks couldn't penetrate Troy's walls by force, so Odysseus, the wisest of the Greek generals, hit on a brilliant plan. The Greeks would pretend to have given up, returned home, leaving in their place an enormous wooden horse, a kind of 'Sorry-for-having-spent-the-last-ten-years-fighting-you' gift. The Trojans would bring that horse inside those mighty walls and, once night fell and they were all asleep, Odysseus's plan would come to fruition. You see, the horse was hollow, and filled with a small group of Greek soldiers—commandos, you might say. These soldiers would leave the horse, open the gates of Troy to the rest of the Greek forces, and so much for Troy. Some of you know this. You've seen Troy.

“The one wrinkle in all of this was Laocöon. When he saw that giant horse sitting on the beach, he didn’t like it. Did he know what the Greeks were up to? Not exactly, but he suspected something. You don’t fight like mad for ten years and then just leave. Laocöon grabbed a spear from a convenient soldier and threw it at the horse. The spear struck the belly—where the Greek special forces were hiding—with a hollow sound. Boom, as opposed to, thunk. You can imagine, the Greeks were panicking, especially when Laocöon insisted the Trojans should burn the thing right here. So were the gods who supported the Greeks. (Remember, the Trojan war was also a war amongst the Greek gods, with the various gods and goddesses choosing sides and then doing whatever they could to help their side, up to and including entering individual battles in person.)

“The rest of the Trojans weren't so sure. They were tired of the war. They wanted to believe that the Greeks had come to their senses and left quietly, to minimize their humiliation. The horse was a gift, a kind of sacred offering, and you had to be careful about rejecting such things: the gods didn’t take kindly to that behavior. Disgusted, Laocöon walked over to the altar of Poseidon, the god of the sea, to prepare a sacrifice. They were on the beach; it was a good place for an altar to Poseidon. His sons came with him. Maybe they were his assistants; maybe they wanted to be close to their dad. When Laocöon was at the altar, the gods struck. Athena, goddess of wisdom and war, sent a pair of huge snakes out of the sea to crush Laocöon and his boys. Laocöon struggled against them, but it was no use. The sea serpents—whose names were Paxes and Charibea, by the way—killed the three of them on the altar. The rest of the Trojans watched in horror. None of them suspected this was a divine cover-up. They assumed it was a judgment on Laocöon for having spurned the Greeks’ offering. Some of them must have thought of Laocöon’s breaking his vow of celibacy, of his angering Apollo. This was not a voice they wanted to listen to. They promptly set to work hauling the horse into the city.

“So that’s Laocöon, who died with his sons not because of blasphemy, but because he threatened the plans of Athena's side. His sons were the icing on the cake, intended to intimidate the Trojans even more. The misdirection succeeded, and Troy burned.

“As I said, we know nothing about the men who sculpted this,” he waved at the screen, “except that they lived on the island of Rhodes during the first century BC. Were Agesander, Polydorus, and Athenodorus father and sons? That might help explain their choice of subject. Or were they unrelated, three artists who worked on the statue together, or one after the other? It’s hard not to be struck by the coincidence of three men sculpting three figures; although it may be no more than that, coincidence. Another fact worth noting: Rhodes is an island; this is a representation of monsters from the sea. Did the piece come out of, tap into, anxieties about the water that surrounded the artists? Again, we don’t know.”

All right, not bad. The class was engaged; he could feel their interest focused on him. Students responded to stories, and they enjoyed a certain amount of speculation. Now it was time for the tricky part, the shift towards Lessing’s essay. He picked up a stack of copies from his desk, sent them around the room. “This is an excerpt from Robert Fitzgerald’s translation of the *Aeneid*; specifically, of the passage where Aeneas, a Trojan prince who escapes the destruction of his city, describes what happened to Laocöon. Take a minute and read it over.” He raised the lights, scanned the handout himself. Dennis didn’t known Latin, so he wasn’t sure how accurate Fitzgerald’s rendering of Virgil into English was, but he found it vivid, from the description of the snakes “coiling and uncoiling” as they undulated toward shore, the sea frothing around them, to their race up the beach to Laocöon’s sons. Everything happened so fast—the next moment, the sea serpents were around the boys, their father as he rushed to their aid. The image Fitzgerald’s words evoked was more dramatic—more cinematic, Dennis supposed—than the sculpture. He could visualize the heavy coils lashing around Laocöon, his boys disappearing within them, the snakes’ eyes blood red; he could hear their relentless hissing, the rasp of their scales against each other, Laocöon’s “appalling” screams, which were compared to those of a bull broken free of the sacrificial altar. Not for the first time, Dennis thought that it was as if Laocöon were taking the place of the bull he was preparing to offer to Poseidon, a dark reversal of the story of Abraham and Isaac. When the slower students were looking up from their handouts, he asked, “Anyone notice any difference between this passage and the statue?”

Of course, no one did. He watched the class's eyes dip down to escape catching on his as they swept the room. No point in dragging things out. "Virgil describes Laocöon as crying out. He says the cries were 'appalling', awful, which makes sense. The guy's getting crushed to death by a pair of snakes. Who wouldn't cry out? Look at the statue, though." He lowered the lights again. "The son to Laocöon's right is already succumbing to the snakes. The son to his left is trying to step out of the coils, shake them off. Look at the expression on that son's face. Is he angry with his father for what he's brought down on them, for his inability to save them? Laocöon's struggling mightily, and he appears to be reasonably muscular, but the look on his face tells the whole story, doesn't it? Pain, failure—he knows what's coming, and if he doesn't understand the reason for it—which maybe he does: if he was shrewd enough to recognize the Trojan Horse for what it was, maybe he understood what was happening to him and his sons—anyway, he knows that he doesn't have a chance. When the gods have it in for you, you're done.

"But he isn't yelling. To us, that's maybe not such a big deal. It could be that Agesander and company knew a different version of the story, one with no screaming. It could be that they'd figured out that's it's not so easy to yell when there are giant snakes wrapped around you. It could be simply that they made the decision not to illustrate that particular moment of the narrative. To John Winckelmann, however—the art historian Lessing is responding to in his essay—to him, this question of why the figure of Laocöon isn't screaming is a major concern. As we've seen before, critics and philosophers are prone to this kind of thing. They seize on what might appear a small, even insignificant detail and make it the cornerstone of a major essay. Which is what Herr Winckelmann does; the discrepancy between the written story of Laocöon and the visual representation of it spurs him to think about what sculpture does. To cut to the chase, Winckelmann argues that Classical Greek art is all about 'noble simplicity and quiet grandeur' (that's a quote; I won't embarrass myself by attempting the German). This concern trumps all other concerns, so that whatever it is you want to represent, the finished product must produce that noble simplicity and quiet grandeur.

"This is where Lessing starts off."

Given his almost total lack of preparation, it was a better beginning than he had any right to expect. He raised the lights, divided the class into small groups, distributed the questions he wanted each group to discuss, and sat down at his desk to review his copy of Lessing and the annotations crowding its margins. When the cell phone sounded, his head shot up, face flushing with vexation. If there was one thing Dennis insisted on, it was that his students silence their phones before class started. It took him a good five seconds, during which he glanced about the room in search of the offending device, before he recognized the electronic approximation of Bach as the ring tone of his own cell. The red of his face deepened. He fumbled through his bag as the phone continued its tinny song, his self-consciousness contending with worry. Kelly was the only person who had this number. It was the sole reason he had a cell, in case there was an emergency with the boys and she needed to contact him. He located the phone inside a folder, retrieved it, said to the class, “I apologize—this is an emergency,” and half-ran out into the hall, pressing the receive button. “Hello?”

At first, he couldn’t understand what Kelly was saying. “What?” he said. “I’m sorry—what did you say?”

“I said, You idiot,” Kelly answered. “What the hell were you thinking?”

“What was—about what? What are you talking about? What’s wrong?”

“Brian.”

His heart was pounding in his throat. “Brian? What about Brian? What’s wrong with him? What happened?”

“He was up half the night with nightmares from that stupid movie you took him to. He had to come into bed with me, he was so scared.”

“That’s it?”

“You don’t think your son being completely traumatized by a movie you took him to is important?”

“No, I—he was fine. I mean, he was a little upset, but nothing—”

“I had to keep him home from school today, which means I had to reschedule all my appointments. That’s lost income, Dennis. Are you going to make that up?”

“So he had a nightmare. I don’t understand.”

“He was screaming at the top of his lungs about the man with no face. By the time I got to his room, he was practically hysterical. He was pleading with me not to put him in a mask. Can't you give me one night to myself? Do you have to ruin everything?”

“You've got every night to yourself,” Dennis said. “That’s what divorce means.”

“Forget it.”

Understanding broke over him. “Oh. Wait a minute. You mean there was someone there with you. By the time you got to his room. But it’s the next room over. Unless you had to get dressed, first.”

“Shut up. This isn’t about me. It’s about taking my son to a PG-13 movie __”

“Sounds more like it’s about you not getting laid.”

“Dammit, Dennis—”

“I'm in the middle of class,” he said. “I’m sorry if Brian having a nightmare interfered with your plans.” He hung up, and switched the phone to vibrate, which it did almost immediately. He ignored it. No doubt, there would be a nice collection of messages waiting for him by the time Kelly was through. Threats to call her lawyer? You bet. Promises to restrict his time with Brian and Liam even more? Count on it.

The class stared at him as he pulled the door open. “Sorry about that,” he said, resuming his seat. “Okay—five more minutes, and then we'll discuss what you've come up with.”

Despite the interruption of the call, he felt oddly good—almost triumphant. This wasn’t the first time he’d confronted Kelly with something approximating success, but it tended to be more exception than rule. His heart was thumping as if he’d just sprinted across a finish line, and his shoulder—which had been quiet for the last day and change—had joined it, marching to its own beat. He placed his hand over the wound, and jerked it away as pain lanced across his chest. Hot—the skin under and around the bandaid was so hot he could feel it through his shirt. Obviously infected. When had this happened? He had been too occupied with the approaching class to spare much attention on anything else this morning—except for a

couple of quick scribbles for the Discovery's new face—but he was sure that, had the area surrounding the bandaid been red, uncomfortable, let alone actively painful, he would have noticed it. Could an infection flare up like this? No doubt.

The tide of conversation in the room had ebbed. The students were waiting for him. "All right," Dennis said. "Let's hear what you've come up with." Their answers were as varied as the students themselves, but even the worst of them contained something, some germ he could grow. No, Lessing doesn't think that the written and the visual arts are the same thing, governed by the same rules. (Although he agrees with Winckelmann that Classical Greek art is concerned with nobility of expression.) Yes, painting and sculpture are concerned with space, which means what? That the visual artist is going to want to look for the moment that best expresses what he's trying to represent, the climax to the story. How about poetry? Right, writing is concerned with time. Which means? Not exactly—it's more that a poem or story functions sequentially. Writing gives us a chain of events; it shows us the passing of time; so it's more deeply concerned with movement, with the ephemeral. (There's a poem—I can't remember the title—or the poet, for that matter—but it has a line that goes something like, "Tell me a story—the name of the story will be time." You might say that time is the subject—or subtext—of all writing.) Okay, so back to the original question that started all this: why isn't Laocöon shouting in agony in the sculpture? Kind of—although Agesander and co. could have opted to show that moment. All right: how do you create terrible scenes in a novel? How does Stephen King do it? With words, yes. What kind of words? In other words, does he have to use horrible words to describe horrible events? Not really. In and of itself, "blood," say, isn't a particularly vile word, is it? No, it's just a word. What the writer does is combine those words to achieve his or her horrific effect. The visual arts, though, are different. There, the only way to convey the sheer awfulness of Laocöon's death cries is to show them happening. Obviously, right? That's the way sculpture works. And to show that kind of thing, Lessing says, would be too much. It would be too terrible, the opposite of the nobility Lessing argues the Greeks were after. It would constitute a kind of abuse of the special power of the visual arts. It

makes you wonder what Lessing would have made of a film like *Alien*, of horror movies in general.

That got them talking. Asa rule, Dennis had found that students were willing to discuss movies more than they were willing to discuss any other art form—even though, as he had pointed out to them, many of the concepts they raised in such discussions could be carried over to painting or sculpture with relative ease. They loved horror movies. Several hands actually shot up, a couple attached to students who might otherwise have been comatose. He called on them, first. Well, maybe horror movies weren't scary; maybe you did go to the theater to laugh at them as much as anything. What about the people who made them, though? Did they think of what they were doing as a joke? Sure, in some cases, but what about *Alien*? Yes, there were a couple of out-and-out gross-out moments: the infamous "chest-burster" scene, and there was a moment later in the film when the Alien punches its jaws—that second set of spring-loaded teeth—through one of the crewmembers' heads. That's true, we aren't the ancient Greeks. We aren't even eighteenth century Germans. Nobility isn't necessarily what we're after in a work of art. So what is? Yes—well, you haven't answered my question, but that's an interesting point. Maybe Lessing's ideas don't apply to film—it's true that what you have with film is a medium that combines the visual with the narrative. Like drama—Lessing was a playwright, you know, quite a famous one. Maybe you're right, though, maybe in film, the temporal aspect wins out, and images function less as images and more as a kind of visual language.

His shoulder was actively uncomfortable, emitting little bursts of pain with each pulse. The discomfort reached down his left arm. Could he be having a heart attack? That was ridiculous. Concentrate on the class. What about comic books? They were like movies, right, in that they combined the visual with the narrative, but due to their design, the visual of necessity had to possess greater weight, didn't it? If a particular panel caught your attention, you were free to linger on it. So what about the monsters that roamed through comics? What about horror comics?

He was losing them. He could feel the interest he'd stirred rushing out of the room like water swirling down a drain. He pointed to the slide, still faintly visible on the screen. "Okay," he said, "let's think about something

else. Is this sculpture—this cause of so much spilled ink—really as divorced from time, from matters temporal, as Lessing wants it to be? Isn't it all about time? After all, what's its underlying subject? Anyone?" Silence. "Death. Regardless of whether Laocöon is yelling or gritting his teeth or smiling, this statue is about death. It's about this man seeing his future close off in the most dramatic, the most immediate of ways. Not only is he going to die, but his sons—whom you might think of as a very real symbol for the future, his legacy to the future—they're going to die with him. Those snakes, they're the future. They're time, strangling Laocöon the way they do all of us. It's inescapable. There's this story—Zeus, the king of the Greek gods, goes back to the beginning of everything. You know what he sees? Scales—giant scales, everywhere. At first, he can't figure out what he's seeing. Then he realizes, it's a pair of snakes, these incredibly big, these mind-bogglingly huge, snakes. They're in the process of mating, and giving birth to the universe we know. Those snakes create time; they give us death. What better image for the passage of time is there than the coils of a snake, gradually drawing around you? You're young; you're full of possibility. Yeah, yeah, but it's true. The world is your oyster. The streets are paved with gold. The older you get, though, the more you find that doors are closing to you—have closed, were shut a long time ago. The dreams you treasured as a child are so many rusted toys, their springs broken, while the ambitions you replaced them with when you were older—now, in college—are withered on the vine, empty husks. There's no pearl in that oyster, just a lump of gray, greasy muscle. As for those gilded streets, they were only ever yellow paint and a trick of the morning light. Underneath it all, that's what this statue is about: time and death and how your hopes for the future are offered up on the altar of your failure."

Students were glancing around the room, at their books, each other, anywhere but Dennis. He had gone too far, crossed over into a place of personal revelations—however vaguely-worded—the students had no interest in—worse, were embarrassed by. What was he doing? What was he saying? This wasn't what he believed (was it?). It was his shoulder, which was burning, now. Sweat stood out on his forehead. He walked over to the slide projector and clicked it off. "That's enough for today," he said. The class grabbed their books, bags, started to rise. "Don't forget the assignment

for next class," he called as he retrieved the slide from the projector; although he couldn't remember what that reading was. "Start thinking about your final papers."

The room emptied quickly.

6

There was no point in office hours. No one would show. They hadn't reached the panic point of the session, which usually came the week before the end of classes and brought all the students who either had problems or thought they did to his door. With his shoulder feeling like this, there was no sense in sitting at his desk just to sit at it, so he wrote a hurried note that his office hours were cancelled, if you needed to contact him, please use his e-mail address, thumb-tacked it to the office door, and left. He was halfway across campus when it occurred to him that he should have stopped into the department secretary's office to bum a couple of aspirin off her. No matter —his apartment was a ten-minute walk, and besides, this way, he'd avoid the chair. He continued on his way, excoriating himself as he went.

What the hell had that been about? The class had been going fine; he'd even dealt with Kelly's interruption—her outrageous, completely-unwarranted abuse of his cellphone; and then what? He'd lost it. No kidding. Why? Why did he have to do that? Why couldn't he have let the class go early and quit while he was ahead? Why did he have to sabotage himself? A wave of self-loathing so intense it made him dizzy poured over him. It was always like this: he started off well, then crashed and burned. He had had enough talent to work in comics; he'd made a couple of contacts, shown his work to assistant editors and up-and-coming writers who told him maybe in another year or two, when they were established—which all of them were, full editors and writers on a dozen titles, now, and if he'd hung in there, if he'd trusted his love for the medium instead of letting his undergraduate advisor's disdain for comics infect him and steer him away from such a juvenile avocation, who knew where he might be? Pencilling for *The Fantastic Four*, maybe. But no: Ray Hamilton's dismissal of a career in comics had fed his anxieties about their legitimacy as a career-path, and

rather than remain faithful, he’d abandoned his childhood love for the plastic arts.

Not that he hadn’t been good at sculpture. Better than good—Hamilton had recognized that, told Dennis he had it in him to be another David Smith. It was true, from his first Intro to Sculpture class, Dennis had discovered a tremendous facility for sculpture, whether the material were clay, stone, wood, or metal. At the end of that course, Dennis's statue of Thor struggling against the Midgard Serpent (which, interestingly, was wrapped around him; the important difference being his war hammer raised to crush its head) had been selected for display in the campus museum. By the time of his graduation, he had amassed a number of decent pieces, the best of which had been a semi-abstract aluminum representation of the temptation of Eve. An MFA had seemed almost perfunctory. He had debated finding a day-job performing some menial task (like, say, managing a video store) so that he could throw himself into his work. Ray Hamilton had insisted, though, told Dennis the degree would help him hone his considerable skill and allow him to teach. In fact, Ray had said, if Dennis were enrolled in an MFA program, he would see what he could do about getting him a class here at the university, so that when he went out on the job market, he’d have a wealth of experience under his belt. Columbia had accepted his application, and Ray had been good as his word, securing Dennis a class during the next year’s summer session, the strong student evaluations of which earned him a call from the department chair that fall, when she needed someone to take over a class for the second half of the semester because the original professor had been in a car accident. His performance there, in turn, had guaranteed him a class in the spring, two in the summer, which had led to two the next fall. All the while, he had been pursuing the MFA, taking classes, assisting professors, pushing his work into new places. The commute to the City had been a pain, but he'd calculated that it was cheaper for him to be on the bus three or four times a week and live in Huguenot than it would have been to reside in a comparable apartment near Manhattan and take the subway. His professors at Columbia had been hard to impress—no surprise—but in the end, he had, returning to the subject of Thor and his serpentine enemy for a significantly larger piece that had been accepted for a show in SoHo, where it had drawn a fair notice from the

Voice, a mildly-condescending response from the *Times*, and most importantly, a check for five thousand dollars from the head of a software company shopping for a tangible gift to accompany the half-million dollars he was going to bequeath to his old community college. Dennis had been delirious with happiness, and when the girl he'd been so impressed with in his Theories of Art class the previous semester had appeared in his doorway to ask if he was available for dinner, nothing fancy, just Pete’s, the cake had received a thick coating of sweet frosting.

He caught his foot on an uneven lip of sidewalk, almost went down on his face. For two, even three, years, things had been good. His relationship with Kelly had progressed more quickly and smoothly than any of its predecessors. They moved in together within six months of that first meal, and were married a year and a half after that, in a somewhat rushed service occasioned by the positive sign on a home pregnancy test. Dennis had continued his degree, completing his coursework, making plans for his thesis. He should have had the MFA in hand and been out on the job market in short order, but an argument and subsequent falling-out with his thesis advisor had derailed his progress. Not living in the City, he had found tracking down and talking to other professors more of a challenge than he would have had he been able to hop onto the nearest subway. Nate Williams, who'd agreed to serve as his replacement advisor, was young and ambitious, more concerned with advancing his own career than guiding Dennis through the beginning of his, which he’d rationalized by telling Dennis that the thesis was something he would have to do largely by himself—his ability to complete it was, Nate said, the real final exam. Dennis had recognized the self-serving quality of Nate’s declaration, but he’d been too grateful to find someone who didn’t have a problem with him residing upstate—the woman he’d approached before Nate had told him flatly that if he wanted to work with her, he’d have to relocate—not to mention, confident of his ability to power through the thesis, to be very concerned. Already, he had been laying in plans for his final project, which would be larger than anything he’d attempted thus far, a take on Apollo slaying Python that would bring the dynamism of Bernini together with a fragmentary approach to form more in keeping with contemporary work. His sun god would be an assemblage of glass, aluminum, and copper, his

monster an assortment of junk arranged on a wire frame. He had filled one wall of his and Kelly’s apartment with preliminary drawings that showed the confrontation between god and beast in the hyper-real style of superheroes and -villains, Apollo flying past Python, right leg extended behind him, left leg raised at the knee, torso twisted to the right, toward the straight right arm that held the short, curved bow, left arm drawn back and away from the arrow it had released into the great snake, whom Dennis had rendered a confusion of coils surmounted by a vast, gaping mouth fringed with teeth. He had snuck his features onto Apollo’s face, which he planned to deny when Kelly noticed, so that she would have to insist and he could appear surprised by the operations of his subconscious, which would allow her to observe that the work reflected his struggles as an artist, which he knew and had intended but wanted to hear her say, anyway. Kelly, however, hadn’t noticed, too busy with her pregnancy and worrying over their small apartment.

His shoulder was in agony, made worse, it seemed, by his brisk pace. He had to pause, catch his breath. He was outside Prospero’s Books. He stopped and stood panting, pretending to survey the store’s display window and fooling no one. Look at the fat guy—he’s so out of shape he can’t even walk. Through his reflection in the glass, the featured books were gaudy rectangles, bright illustrations surmounted by foil lettering. From the covers of half-a-dozen *Star Wars* tie-ins, Darth Vader’s blank lenses returned Dennis's gaze. To their right, Doctor Doom glowered from *The Mighty Marvel Book of Villains*. He didn’t recognize the artist, who had done an impressive job at rendering the gray armor that encased the evil dictator; you could feel the weight of it, the effort it took Doom to support his self-imposed prison. What had Marley's ghost said to Scrooge? “I made this chain that binds me,” something along those lines—each link a misdeed made real. What did a series of failures earn you? Nothing as dramatic as a chain, much less a suit of armor, more like a pair of glasses the wrong prescription and a pair of shoes that tripped you up. Although, there was a story in one of the Gospels, wasn’t there, about a servant who doesn’t invest the money his master has entrusted him with—he hides it, instead—and is punished for having done so. Great—maybe there was a suit of armor in his future, after all.

Thing was, he'd had the talent—still did. The drawings he'd filled the register tape with were better than ninety-nine percent of the artists he knew could do. Well, maybe more like eighty-nine percent, but that was nothing to complain about. That could have been his rendering of Dr. Doom on the cover of that book. His sculpture was good. The statues of Brian had drawn comments, compliments from everyone who saw them. Despite her continuing dislike for those pieces, Kelly had suggested he look into using them to complete his degree, which he'd said he would, though only to appease her. Flush with the success of having completed something significant after years of minor and unfinished work, Dennis had felt ready to dive back into his thesis, follow these statues with one that would really grab people's attention (and money).

He'd gone so far as to call Nate Williams, share the news of his big sale and promise the resumption of his degree work shortly. Sure, he'd been thrown off by the birth of his sons, the second of whom had been no more planned (by him, anyway) than the first, both of whom demanded more of his time than he ever could have anticipated, which he'd had to give because Kelly had secured a school job that paid well and offered health care for the four of them, and he'd said yes, she should take it, the interest on their combined credit card debt, let alone the actual amount they owed, was more than either of them could afford. Dennis had imagined there would be sufficient time for him to continue his work, which wasn't even mildly funny, it had been so mistaken, so flat-out wrong. He'd had to sacrifice his ambitions to support Kelly in her job, which had paid the bills and put better food on the table than Chef Boy-Ar-Dee, and expanded to a consulting business that had promised and then delivered a house for them, a house with space for him to have a studio (which he hardly ever used). But all of that was the past, so much blood under the bridge, as Kelly liked to say. He had taken time off for his family. It had been a good thing to do, as a father and an artist. Look at the inspiration Brian had provided. Soon, his time would be coming around.

Except that it had never arrived. Dennis looked away from the books filling his reflection. He had to start walking again. With each throb of his shoulder, pain knifed across his chest, his arm. He wasn't sure what he had in the apartment aside from a bottle of Tylenol and another of White Horse,

but he could look under the band aid, at least. Five minutes, not even, a couple hundred steps. The hole in his shoulder seemed to go through to some other dimension of pure pain. He turned away from his reflection and headed for home.

They had spent the thirty thousand the statues of Brian had brought them on a family camping trip to the Adirondacks—more economical, despite the calamine lotion baths they had to give the boys after they discovered a clump of poison ivy to roll their soccer ball into—and on paying down their mortgage. Dennis had fully intended to begin his thesis—had dug out his old drawings and designs for it, swept out the studio, purchased some of the material he expected to use (following a short break to which he was, after all, entitled—he had labored over the Brian statues intensely; he had earned some free time). Besides, he hadn't thought either Kelly or the boys was prepared for him to disappear into his studio for another six months.

And that had been that. His respite had grown from weeks to months, from months to years. He had completed a handful of minor pieces in the meantime, two of them commissions from people who had seen his sculpture of Thor and the Midgard Serpent outside the science building at Rockland Community College, the others occasional small statues that he had thought might be the start of something bigger—a pantheon of contemporary American gods, Madonna, Arnold Schwarzenegger, Britney Spears, done as neo-Hellenic deities—but that hadn’t. Every two or three months, Kelly had raised the matter of the thesis, mostly in acid comments, but occasionally with an emotion approaching real concern. Maybe he was afraid of success, she’d said, which had been significantly different from the usual explanations she put forth for his failure to complete his degree—all varieties of laziness, sloth—for Dennis to ask her what she meant. “There’s no doubting your ability,” she had said—had they been in bed? He remembered an obvious pun that had provoked a tolerant smile. “As long as your degree isn’t done, you're a student. Whatever you accomplish is the achievement of a student who's exceeding expectations. If you finish the degree, that won't be the case anymore. That part of your life will be over. You'll have to live up to your successes, which can be a scary thing.”

“Paralyzed by potential,” he had murmured.

“Something like that.”

Who knew if she had been right? Not long after that particular exchange—which might have taken place in the Plaza Diner, now that he thought of it—their marriage had stated showing signs of fracture. Another part of his life he had dynamited. How hard would it have been to have given Kelly what she wanted? He could have used her demands as a spur to complete his degree, killed two birds with a single piece of parchment. But something in him had risen up, rebelled, announced that he would not be treated this way, dictated to, given ultimatums, above all patronized. He wasn't one of the children, for God's sake. It was the principle of the thing, a clichéd rationale that had become a magnet attracting all the other petty resentments a decade together had excavated. Up until the day of their final meeting with the lawyers—on the drive to the office—there had been moments Dennis had shaken his head and said, "Why am I doing this?" Any impulse toward reconciliation, however, had been buried beneath an avalanche of indignation and anger.

By the time he reached the door to his apartment, his shirt was drenched with sweat. He winced as he withdrew his keys from his pocket and unlocked the door, pain so strong it made his stomach roll with nausea rippling over him. Were these the symptoms of tetanus?

The Discovery was waiting for him. (*Mine*.) It looked more real, more present than ever, as if the rest of the room were slightly out of focus and only its lines were clear. Stripping off his coat, his shirt, groaning at the movement, he made for the bathroom. His face shone back at him from the medicine cabinet's mirror. He angled his left shoulder closer to the glass. The skin surrounding the band aid was crimson, threaded through with black veins. He swallowed, reached for the loose end of the band aid, and tore it off, catching his breath at the hair it took with it, his eyes blurring with tears.

The scab was thick, dark, weeping pus the gold of new motor oil. The black veins radiated from it, a tattoo of infection. There was—what was—he moved back and forth, watching as the scab caught the light and glittered, that was the only word for it. He reached up and ran his fingers over it. Where the skin surrounding it was burning, the scab was cool, its texture more that of unrefined ore than congealed blood. He traced the scab's borders, jagged as the opened lid of a tin can. Ever-so-slightly, it shifted

under his fingertips, loose. He eased his index finger along it, searching for the place where the scab was starting to come away. At the top. His fingernail was just long enough to fit under the scab's edge. Dennis winced in anticipation of further pain, but either there was none or the discomfort of the scab parting from his skin was drowned out by the deeper hurt throbbing beneath it. Using his nail as a lever, he gently lifted the scab. It raised slightly, but he could feel the skin tugging where its grip was still tight. Maybe he should leave it, allow it to fall off in another day or two. Don't pick at scabs: wasn't that some kind of maxim, proverb or cliché? The wound was obviously, infected, though: the thick, golden fluid oozing from it, the black lines spreading from it, were clear indications. If he could remove the scab, maybe he could express the pus and his shoulder would heal without a trip to the doctor. He slid his middle finger in beside his index finger for additional leverage. "One," he said, breathing in, feeling the sweat tickling down his forehead, his neck, his chest, his back, under the waist of his jeans. "Two," breathing out, gripping the edge of the sink with his left hand. "Three," jerking his right hand down and away, ripping the scab free.

And doubling over with the agony that ignited, convulsing so fast and so hard he struck his forehead full on the sink. White light burst across his vision—for an instant, he literally did not know anything—then he was on the bathroom floor, his back, his shoulder wet, his brow wet, his eyes wet. Dennis went to sit up, but the suffering that roared through him in response to his effort pinned him to the floor like a frog ready to be vivisected. The air was ripe with smells: copper and turpentine and petroleum. The ceiling, the top of the shower stall, quavered, as if they might burst and give way to something else, some other space, visual analogue to the excrutiation that wracked him. It had been attached—as the scab had surrendered its place, it had tugged as if it were threaded right into his nervous system, anchored to his spine. Pulling it off had been like stripping a sheaf of nerves from his skin. Tears poured from the corners of his eyes, over and into his ears; what had to be blood trickled from his forehead into his hair; pus dripped from his shoulder onto the floor. The ceiling shuddered, no more substantial than the surface of a pond, and he could almost see behind—beyond it, the dull white tiles above him receding, receding and enlarging, elongating into pale

diamonds, into row after row of spoiled-white diamonds that together defined the contours of an enormous trunk, a vast cylinder that arced across a backdrop thick with stars, with asteroids like a god's rock collection, with gaudy comets disgorging themselves into their tails, and when the great pale mass shuddered and shifted, sending asteroids caroming off it like so many marbles, shattering a comet in a splash of fire, Dennis understood that this huge column was the body of an inconceivably long snake, or something else whose closest analogue was a snake, that wound its way through the hearts of stars and threaded them together like beads on a necklace. Its hide was alive with movement, crawling with packs of spindly creatures with long tails and jagged heads—with a surge of emotion so strong it added to his pain, Dennis realized these were completed Discoveries, not viruses but parasites, stopping intermittently to dig their sharpened heads into the scales beneath them.

Something was moving on his shoulder. On and in it, as if someone were wiggling a finger in the open wound. Exhaling with the pain, Dennis succeeded in raising his head enough to inspect it out of the bottom limit of his vision. What appeared to be a slender tube—good Christ, a snake! a fucking snake!—protruded from the center of the hole in his shoulder, raising itself up a good three or four inches, swaying slightly, as if testing the air. It was thin as electrical wire, streaked with blood and pus, beneath which it looked grey, almost silver—the fresh torrent of tears holding his head aloft provoked blurring the thing into Impressionist approximation. He could feel it, though, twisting beneath his skin, and the sensation made his mind swim, his stomach and bowels clench. The exposed end of the snake flopped on his skin, coiled around itself.

This was too much. All of it was too much. He let his head fall back again. Oh God, he prayed. Oh God. The snake uncoiled, stretched out as if to measure the distance around it. Oh God. Oh fuck. He was breathing too fast, hyperventilating. His vision was constricting. Fuck. When he lost consciousness, it was with something like gratitude.

Dennis didn’t awaken so much as awareness seeped into him. Cold—his back, the backs of his arms, the back of his head were pressed against cold. A dull ache suffused him, as if he were succumbing to the flu. In places—his head, his shoulder—the ache shaded toward a sharper sensation. A host of smells jostled one another for his attention: the salt and musk of dried sweat, the heavy pungence of urine, a metallic odor he couldn't place that tingled the insides of his nostrils to a sneeze, then another, a constellation of lights bursting in front of his vision with each explosion. He opened his eyes. Dark. His teeth, tongue tasted flat, foul, filmed with dead saliva. Muscles protesting, he raised his arms and felt his forehead, his shoulder, both of them caked with dried fluid. His shoulder was cool.

Groaning, Dennis heaved himself first to sitting, then standing, the blood rushing in his ears. He fumbled the switch to the light above the mirror, blinked at what the weak yellow glow revealed. His forehead was traversed by a cut that probably should have had stitches, or at least a doctor’s attention. The scab gave way to a periphery of black and blue, runneled by dried blood. The face beneath was pale, its skin loose. His shoulder—he was almost afraid to look at it. The wound had clotted again. The dark lines that had radiated from it were faded. He brushed his fingers over the area. Whatever infection had festered there appeared to have broken, drained, it seemed, by his having re-opened the wound. This scab felt normal enough; although he didn’t care to investigate it too closely. He turned away from the mirror, reaching into the shower stall to turn the hot tap on full. What time was it? He glanced at his watch. Three thirty a.m.. One way to get the hot water. He kicked off his shoes, pulled off his socks, unzipped and stepped out of his jeans, boxers, both of which, he noticed, concentrated the urine smell. Great: in the throes of the infection, his bladder had decided to jettison its cargo. At least his colon had shown some discipline.

The shower was so hot he hissed when he stepped under it. Hot and strong: apparently, the middle of the night was the time for water pressure, as well. He dipped his head under it, taking the full force on his scalp, the water drumming on his skull. He stood leaning forward, arms out, hands flat against the wall of the shower, letting the scalding water wash down his forehead, his neck, his shoulders, his back, his chest, his legs, until his skin cried out for relief. He gave the cold tap a quarter-turn, enough to moderate

the temperature to boiling, and grabbed the soap. Already, he could see the run-off dark with dirt and blood spiraling down the drain.

What had happened to him? There was no way he could have gone through what he'd (thought he'd) been through: metallic scabs, bizarre vistas he couldn't but could see, things poking out of his skin. It had to have been a hallucination unleashed by the fever brought on by the infection. Dennis hadn't hallucinated before, not like this—a couple of times, when he'd stayed up all night, he'd glimpsed things at the corners of his vision, but nothing that had moved front and center. No doubt the Giger he'd been looking at hadn't helped matters any. It was almost frightening, the way someone else's vision could so completely invade your own—if you were burning with fever and infection in the first place.

He remained under the shower longer than he needed to, luxuriating in its unceasing stream of hot water. He washed the pus from his shoulder—some of it still viscous—and did what he could to clean the blow to his forehead without re-opening it. When he stepped out of the stall, he felt, if not revived, at least not caked with filth. He tossed his socks, jeans, boxers in the hamper, kicked his shoes out into the living room. There was enough time for him to squeeze in four, even five hours of sleep before he would have to rise for another long shift at the video store. He flung his towel over the top of the stall, switched off the medicine cabinet light, and headed for bed.

To stop outside the door, his attention snagged by the Discovery, shining in the light pouring through the window from the 24 hour Mobil Mart across the street. In the living room's chiaroscuro, the statue almost appeared to be complete, the light and shadow lending it an angular head whose design recalled what he had (not) seen in his hallucination. Hey, I could—and then he had it, the solution presenting itself fully-formed. Heart pounding, Dennis stood very still. Would that? Yes. Yes yes yes yes yes. Oh my God. That's it.

All thought of sleep forgotten, Dennis ran to the futon and reached for the sketchpad and pencil beside it. He didn't waste time flipping on the light—there was plenty of illumination from the windows. Standing beside them, he began drawing the outlines of the Discovery's new face. He worked

calmly but quickly; after all, he only had four, maybe five hours; although he didn’t think he’d need all of them.

8

Dennis had anticipated his shift at Huguenot Video dragging by, and his prediction was correct. Not even Lena’s appearance in a black rayon top with no bra underneath could distract him from the clock’s advance (for long, anyway). “Holy shit,” she said, “what did you do to your head?”

“What?” He’d meant to bandage his forehead, but hadn’t been able to find any gauze to wrap around it. “Nothing,” he said. “I fell.”

“Yeah. Are you all right?”

“Yes.”

Before he knew what she was doing, Lena reached out and touched the scab. Her fingers were cool; his pulse jumped at the contact. “That must’ve hurt,” she said. “Maybe you should see a doctor.” She withdrew her hand.

“I’m fine,” he said, “honestly.” The trace of her fingers on his skin lingered; Dennis’s blood sang in his veins. It had been years since he’d been so suddenly aroused.

That passed, however. Of course, customer traffic was slower than usual, and once he’d performed his daily duties, plus fulfilled his weekly task of constructing the schedule for next week—and, tentatively, the week after that—there was little for him to do except sit behind the counter and watch Cronenberg’s adaptation of *Crash* on the store TV, which Lena had suggested with what Dennis could have sworn was mild flirtatiousness. If his mind hadn't been too full for him to spend the analysis and hope on the matter, he otherwise would have.

He had done it. At 5:05 that morning, when the sky was lightening but still held a few stars, Dennis had set down his sketchbook and pencil on the futon and stretched, his body thrumming like a plucked guitar string. It was the way he felt after an especially successful session in the studio, the sensation that had taken hold of him after he and Kelly had conceived Brian, as if he were the conduit for a tremendous source of raw energy, which he supposed he was, the wellsprings of his psychological and

physical creativity. There was more to it than that, though—while the feeling no doubt owed some of itself to those internal processes, it seemed to emerge from beyond himself.

On several occasions, he'd tried to explain it to Kelly, not so much because she was curious (she was, but only mildly), as because he felt the urge to verbalize the process to himself. "There's a moment," he had said. "Before that, I'm just, not going through the motions, not exactly, but I'm kind of fumbling along. And then, I'm in this place—or this state—or this state that's a place—I'm still here, still in my studio, but it's like, *here* has changed, opened up, filled with this power, this potential, that I can practically see. The funny thing is, I'm almost never aware of moving into that place until I've been there a while. Once I'm in it, though, inhabiting it, being inhabited by it, I—the image I have is of this kind of cable, this cord snaking through, well, everything, this conduit of raw energy that I'm tapping into, jamming my head into and letting spill out my fingers." That was the closest he'd come to articulating the sensation. Kelly had been unconvinced; to her, Dennis's description had sounded like so much self-aggrandizing. The most she had been willing to entertain was that he might, from time to time, be in touch with something like the *Spiritus Mundi*, if such a thing existed, which she doubted. Not him: times like this, he knew he was plugged into forces vaster than himself as certainly as he could see the Discovery crouched in front of him.

Unable to keep the grin from his face, he had paced the living room, shaking out his hand, which had practically cramped around the pencil. This was better than good work; this was a design at least the quality of the Discovery itself. Had he had his old studio, Dennis would have wasted no time crossing the yard to it and commencing the next phase of the project, the sifting of materials to determine what could be used and what he would have to buy. Since Kelly had wasted no time in turning his studio into a playroom for the boys, however, and all Dennis's materials and tools were in storage in a unit on the edge of town whose last month's rental he had yet to pay, he would have to make use of the metal studio at the college, which he wasn't really supposed to but which he should be able to get away with so long as he worked there after hours.

Which would be what he did after his shift was finally over, striding up the street and across campus to the Smith Art Building, to which he had a set of keys that technically, as an adjunct, he wasn't entitled, but that Elaine had trusted him with for just such an occasion as this, back when Dennis finishing his MFA had been at least a possibility. In one of the larger rooms, several students were at work on paintings; through the open door, Styx sang "Mr. Roboto" from someone's boom box set to the eighties hour on the campus radio station. He grimaced. When had eighties music become classic rock? Classic rock was Elvis and Chuck Berry—fifties hits. Styx was—granted, you couldn't call them contemporary anymore, but they were recent enough not to have earned the classic designation. The song, with its synthesized chorus ("Domo arigato, Mr. Roboto") followed him down the hall to the metal shop, and even after he'd shut the door behind him, it continued to play between his ears. Perfect. Just what he needed to work to, an overly-ambitious power band's single concept album.

Dennis wasn't expecting to accomplish much this first night, mostly, to inventory material, see what he could reasonably make use of, and maybe start work on the face's frame. But the studio was better-stocked than he'd anticipated, and before long the air was full of the tang of hot metal. Large as the Discovery was, it was light enough that he had to be careful not to physically overbalance it, so he restricted himself to thin sheets of aluminum, not his favorite material, but the one best-suited to his needs. He spread his drawings out on one of the tables; although he needn't have. The plan for the new face glowed in his mind in neon lines. Soon, he was tracing the outlines of its various elements onto the metal with a grease pencil, then cutting them free of their surroundings, then grafting them one onto the other. Aside from the persistent echo of the Styx song ("Domo-Domo; Domo-Domo'") his thoughts were a pleasant blank, all his attention occupied by the challenge of coaxing his ideas out of the metal. Every now and again, he pushed back his work glove to consult his watch, but the shifting positions of the hands registered as little more than a series of different angles.

Before he had stretched the goggles around his head, ignited the blowtorch, Dennis had been aware of himself standing at the margins of that great conduit of energy he had long ago tried to describe to Kelly. By the time he

was drawing the torch along the grease pencil's trail, the aluminum parting as if for a knife of fire, Dennis felt himself fully immersed, plunged into that tremendous reservoir. As he was arranging the metal strips he had cut one over the other, spot-welding them, he could practically see the source with which he was more fully joined than ever, an enormous cable that coiled from one end of the universe to the other. His vision of the huge snake the color of faded paper rose in his memory, but no surge of horror accompanied it; instead, it seemed appropriate, a fitting representation of the channel of power into which he had tapped. He saw the completed Discoveries driving their broken heads into those great scales, and knew it was a trope for what he was doing, for what any artist worth the name did. The artist is the artwork is the source of the artwork; the dancer was the dance was the music. That was Singularity, that was leaving the flesh for something that would never die, an assemblage of vision that would embody the self more fully than any collection of ones and zeroes ever could.

At some point, he looked up from his welding to see a dark figure standing outside the studio. When he raised his goggles, he saw one of the campus police officers. He set down the torch and went to the door, where the officer asked first to see his ID and second if he had any idea what time it was. And third what the hell he was making. Dennis handed over his faculty ID card, apologizing profusely; he hadn't realized it was so late; this was a project he was trying to complete for a class tomorrow, "for a class on mask-making."

"That's a mask?" the cop said, returning his ID.

"It's pretty abstract."

"Looks like something out of a horror movie."

"Well, that's kind of the idea. The parasitic self and all that." What?

"Whatever. What happened to your head?"

"This?" Dennis raised a glove to his forehead. "I slipped in the bathroom, hit myself on the sink. It was pretty painful, let me tell you."

"Looks like it. You know the building's supposed to be closed between two and five."

“I do,” Dennis said, “and I’m sorry, but it would really help me out if you would let me keep working. It must be—what? close to three?”

“Closer to four.”

“So there’s only another hour until the building’s open again. Believe it or not, I’m almost done with this. I can’t believe it. I can’t tell you how much I'd appreciate it if I could complete this.”

The cop—a good ten years younger, and enjoying his power over the mighty professor (little did he know)—spent more time than he needed to pretending to weigh the matter, before telling Dennis to be careful and not cut himself on any of those sharp edges. Dennis had no problems faking the appropriate gratitude. He was much closer to completion than he had anticipated—almost than he could have anticipated. Whatever fatigue should have been sending him staggering off to bed was flushed from his system by the excitement percolating through him. Due in part to the speed his excitement engendered, plus the relative simplicity of his design, he was no more than an hour, an hour and half at the outside, from finishing the basic piece. Dimly, he was aware that he hadn’t eaten anything since the egg and cheese on a hardroll he'd ordered from the Deli, and that he should have been starving, his hands trembling from hunger—he suspected he had low blood sugar but had neglected to be tested for it when he'd had health insurance—but his stomach was quiet, his hands calm.

Amazing how quickly, how effortlessly, your life could pivot. One moment, you were trapped in the doldrums of a stalled career, with a broken marriage whose fragments you were still cutting yourself on; the next, the wind snapped your sails and you were speeding to better lands, in more ways than one—Lena had been flirting with him, unlikely as that seemed. Perhaps she’d sensed the shift in him, responded to the creativity sparking from him; perhaps this time tomorrow evening, she'd be asleep in his bed. It was a possibility he previously would have regarded as so much wasted fantasizing, but if twenty-four hours could bring him from lying on his bathroom floor recovering from a serious infection to standing in the metal studio completing the work that was going to resuscitate his career, who knew where another day would find him? As well to imagine it would be lying beside Lena in sweat-damp sheets. Kelly would love that. Boys, meet Daddy’s new friend. Try not to catch yourselves on her piercings.

He had to teach later that day, Schiller's *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man*, whose spine he hadn't cracked since graduate school but whose inclusion had rounded out what he'd envisioned as a course in German aesthetic ideas. When he'd drawn up the syllabus, it had seemed more interesting than his usual Greatest Hits approach to the course; instead, he would follow the path the aesthetic took through a single culture, an approach that seemed well-fitted to the brevity and intensity of the summer session. He had welcomed the opportunity to catch up on Lessing and Schiller, Nietzsche and Gadamer—ironically, he had hoped, in re-reading them, to encounter something that would ignite his own aesthetic impulses, send him back to the studio. This far, the plan had failed. He had kept up with the reading, prepared decent lesson plans, and that was all. Unless you wanted to argue that staring at the *Laocöon* statue for so long had helped him break through to the new face for the Discovery—there was a kind of sinuousness to the design, to the way he'd bent and crossed the strips of metal that composed the piece, that suggested those marble snakes; though that was maybe pushing matters. He should have been more anxious about the class—under normal circumstances, would have been—but he was too involved with the final welds to worry very much. Maybe it was time to shake things up, do something different—maybe he'd been telling the truth when he'd told the cop he was making the mask for class. Aesthetics in action; let's relate the theory to practice. Students loved that kind of thing; they ate it up. What they loved as much as anything, of course, was the excuse not to have to discuss a text most of them found dull at best.

Dennis stepped back from the face. It was finished. The Discovery was complete—would be, as soon as he could arrange to have it transported here. In the meantime, he would carry the face home with him and try it against the rest of the statue. Not that he had any doubts. A name for the piece had already occurred to him: "From the Negative Zone." He wasn't sure it fit, but he thought so. Would Marvel have a problem with him appropriating the term? Would anyone associated with the comic company even notice? If the sculpture were as successful as he anticipated. He could credit them in the program for the exhibit; that should head off any difficulties.

There wasn’t too much to clean up—what metal hadn't been part of the face’s structure, he had added as ornament as he went. He would have to figure out how to carry it back to the apartment safely, so that he didn’t slice his hand open or damage the piece. He left the face, which had become the Face, a sure sign of its rightness, and checked the next studio down the hall. He didn’t find anything to help him transport the piece, but this was the room in which the department kept a pair of digital cameras for photographing students’ work. He took one of the cameras and returned to the metal studio, where he shot the sculpture from a dozen different angles. Leaving the camera on the table beside the Face, he returned to the next room, locked it, and checked the room across the hall. Bingo: a stack of neatly-folded sheets. He removed the top one from the pile and closed and locked that door, as well. On his way home, he would stop in his office and use its computer to e-mail the digital photos of the Face to Nate Williams, let him see that Dennis was back.

While he was in the office, waiting for the computer to load his pictures, he dialed Melanie's number. There was a decent chance she’d be awake—it was going on six thirty, and hadn't she complained about Jack’s early rising? If there were anyone who would appreciate this day, the breakthrough it represented, it would be her. The phone rang once, twice, and in the middle of the third ring, a voice thick with sleep croaked, “Hello?”

“Hey,” Dennis said, “it’s me.”

“Who is this?”

“Dennis. I’m calling with good news, for a change.”

“Dennis?”

With sudden horror, Dennis understood that he was talking to Arthur. Fighting the impulse to hang up and flee the office, he did his best to brazen out the situation. Arthur said, “Oh, Dennis, right. Geez, man, it’s kind of early, isn’t it?”

“Sorry,” Dennis said. “Melanie told me she’s usually up with Jack. I thought I'd catch her.”

“Yeah. She’s asleep with him right now, in the bed. I took the couch.”

“Oh.” He bit his tongue before he could add, “Well, would you wake her for me?”

“Do you want me to have her call you?”

“If she gets a chance.” He hoped he didn’t sound too eager.

“Is there anything—you said you had good news. Do you want me to give her a message or anything?”

“No,” he said. “no, that’s all right. It’s nothing, really. Sorry to have gotten you up.”

“That’s okay, man. I should be dragging my tired ass off the couch, anyway.”

The feeling that took hold of him once he’d replaced the phone in its cradle, a mixture of embarrassment and melancholy, wasn’t strong enough to overwhelm his sense of triumph, but it was sufficiently acute to blunt the edge of it. Walking through air gold with early sunlight, the Face safely wrapped, cradled in his right arm, Dennis found himself unable not to remember the series of near-misses that had characterized his friendship with Melanie. From their first meeting the first day of classes—she’d sat in front of him in Modern World—he and Melanie had been in sync, their personalities locking together like gears in an engine. In short order, they'd been attracted to one another, but she had been involved in a long-distance relationship that, while strained by hundreds of miles and the widening gap between her and her boyfriend’s ambitions, she refused to abandon. Dennis had thought he’d known better than to press the matter. If things were going to happen between them, then they would. The “if” he’d considered more a “when.”

Except that possible had refused to make the leap to definite. Indeed, Dennis thought as he crossed Main Street, their timing had been so systematically bad as to be comic. By the time Melanie had cut her ties with Mr. Long Distance, Dennis had become involved with a sophomore. Short-lived as that affair had been, it had provided Melanie sufficient time to start seeing a guy from her dorm. When that relationship ran out of gas, Dennis was back together with Ms. Sophomore, by now Ms. Junior, whom he unceremoniously dumped for a girl in the theater department. They had pretty much lived together in her dorm room—much to the chagrin of her

Japanese roommate, who spent every night Dennis was there in the lounge, returning to the room to rest during the day. Melanie had spent the same time alternating between her R.A. and an older guy who tended bar at Pete's Corner Pub. By the time graduation had arrived, Dennis had broken up with Ms. Theater—ironically enough, because she had walked in on him and Yuki—and Melanie was seeing a cadet at West Point. Neither of them had ever been willing to abandon the relationship they were in to take a chance on something between them, which he supposed confirmed its inevitable failure without putting them through the trouble of an actual affair—though he had wondered if the real reason they hadn't fulfilled that initial attraction had been an intuition that to do so would plunge them into—into something enormous, deep, profound, something that would lead to them eloping in three months and having a child in twelve—the possibility, probability of which had been too much for them. Paralyzed by potential, yes. There were times Dennis thought their continued contact was nothing so much asan extended apology to the opportunity they'd failed.

Never mind: Lena's secret jewelry awaited. (She had been flirting with him.) Climbing the stairs to his apartment, Dennis wondered if it would be too obvious for him to invite her up for a look at the completed Discovery. She had seen and expressed interest in his design, hadn't she? The excuse was reasonable. He could say it was only for a minute, he had a lot of work to do, grading. That way, if either or both of them wanted a quick exit from an awkward situation, it would be open for them. On the other hand, if things went well—or at least, not awkwardly—well, a bottle of wine might not be a bad investment, to celebrate his accomplishment. Melanie had made her choice of Arthur and Jack and a life of middle-class comfort and compromise; that didn't mean there wasn't something different in store for him. Gauguin had been, what? forty-two, forty-three when he'd set off on his Tahitian odyssey. What was to say that Dennis, with or without Lena, couldn't embark on a similar journey?

Once he'd unlocked the door and entered his apartment, dim because it would not receive the sun's rays until the sun had climbed another hour higher, it took Dennis a ridiculous amount of time—four, even five seconds—to register the change in it. He had become so used to the Discovery's presence that he assumed it was there. He could practically see it shining in

front of him before his mind caught up with his eyes and told him that there was nothing there. The Discovery was gone.

9

The rest of the morning was bad. Why softsoap it, try to make it sound better than it was by saying it wasn't the worst morning he'd way ever had, the time Kelly had stayed out all night had been worse? If it were possible to rate such things in any kind of absolute sense, maybe that morning had come in ahead of this one. But that had been a single, albeit highly distressing, event that had underlined what they had decided the previous week, that they were splitting up. This was a series of disasters that, by early afternoon, left him in as bad shape as he'd ever been.

First, there was the Discovery, vanished from his living room as if it had never been there, leaving in its wake a coarse gray dust that smelled faintly metallic and provoked Dennis to a sneezing fit when he knelt to examine it. The dust left a ring around each nostril that required vigorous scrubbing with soap and hot water to remove, which incurred a second round of sneezing. He sneezed so much and with such force it was a wonder he didn't open the wound on his forehead. As it was, by the time his nose had exhausted itself, his head was throbbing. More worrisome, so was his shoulder, once again pulsing with its out-of-sync beat. Which didn't stop him from returning to the living room to inspect it yet again.

He could not understand what had happened. Obviously, someone had broken into his apartment and stolen the Discovery—it was the only explanation that made any kind of sense. His downstairs neighbors, though—none too happy at him banging on their door at seven-thirty in the morning—insisted they hadn't heard anyone coming or going on the stairs until he had trod them, a claim to which the guys in the first floor place agreed. Everything had been quiet, which there was no way it would have been if someone were struggling down the stairs with a large statue with moving parts. Even if the thief had been thieves, even if they'd struck in the wee small hours, there was no way for them not to have made enough noise to have registered with his neighbors.

More to the point, though, who would break into his apartment, which, so far as he could tell, showed no signs of forced entry, just to steal a piece of art? Nothing else was missing from the place—not that he had much worth stealing, but you would think a burglar might have eyed something else, something more portable. If they were interested in art, there was a postcard written by Marcel Duchamp framed in his bedroom; it was, undoubtedly, the single most valuable thing Dennis currently owned, not to mention much easier to carry away inconspicuously. Unfinished as it was, how much value could the Discovery have? If the thief had thought there was some worth in the statue's materials, the moment he went to lift it and realized how light it was, that notion should have vanished. Dennis hadn't reached the stage of investigating the piece's exact composition, which he would have needed for the exhibit, but he wouldn't have been surprised to find it made in large part of light wood with at most a thin overlay of metal.

Unless the original artist, the Master, had learned of his work's location and arrived to reclaim it. But that explanation required a narrative that was at least as improbable as any other. Somehow, that artist would have had to have lost the statue—had it stolen himself, or maybe thrown away by an idiot assistant. Or by himself, in a fit of pique. Then—what? The Master learns that Dennis has taken his statue up to his apartment and schemes to get it back? Why not just knock on the door and ask him to return it? Wouldn't that have been simpler? Whoever had made off with the Discovery had left the face Denis had found it wearing behind, on the floor where he had kicked it out of the way after tearing it off, which seemed to lend credence to the idea that the Master lay behind this—unless the burglar hadn't noticed the face, or had assumed it was separate from the Discovery.

Had it not been for that face with its red plastic eyes, its overlapping plates, Dennis would have worried he had imagined a generous portion of the last several days, the cumulative effect of the last two years' stresses having broken his mind at some fundamental level. As it was, he sought out the roll of register tape he'd covered with drawings and his sketch pad, running his fingers over the images he'd set down as if they could call the Discovery back to him. Could he have hallucinated it? Could he have needed the Discovery, the challenge finishing it posed, so intently that he had projected it outside himself? Was that why it had stirred such a strong sense of

ownership in him? But the explanation fell apart while he was still building it. The first face, the Amateur's contribution, was real; as was the spot on his shoulder where the tip of the Discovery's tale had driven through his skin, which continued its singular pulse. You could try to argue that neither of these was any more real, or that he'd manufactured them himself and repressed the memory, but you might as well argue that he was trapped inside Lena's Singularity and the program had developed a glitch. Besides, there was the gray dust he'd spent a solid five minutes scrubbing from the end of his nose, and that no doubt coated his sinuses, if not his lungs.

For a few moments, he wondered if this might be a strange joke—if all of it, his finding the Discovery to begin with, had been some kind of set-up, part of a secret, hidden-camera reality-show. That supposition yielded to a darker one: that Kelly was behind this. She'd come to his apartment on her latest mission of complaint—he'd provided her with a spare key in case of emergency which she regularly used for lesser causes—found the Discovery, and decided to displace whatever aggression she harbored toward Dennis onto it. The scenario wasn't quite as paranoid as it sounded. On one of the prior occasions she'd entered the apartment, Kelly had dug his papers out of their places in a pair of cardboard boxes under his bed and strewn them around the living room in retribution for his refusal to watch Liam and Brian so she could go out on a mid-week date. Although, had she been responsible for this, he would have anticipated a more visible sign of her actions, the statue dismembered, smashed to fragments. This degree of subtlety was inimical to her. When he'd called her about trashing his apartment the last time, not only had Kelly admitted it, she'd dared him to report it to the police.

Dennis had the opportunity to ask her directly as he was preparing to run out the door to class, in the morning's second disaster. Prior to hearing her voice on the phone, he wouldn't have said he was angry. The principle sentiment in which he had been suspended for the last couple of hours was bewilderment, a persistent inability to make the scene in front of him yield its meaning, coupled with a certainty that such a meaning must be present. The second he heard Kelly saying, "We have to talk," that changed. Rage boiled the air around him. "What did you do?" he said, trampling whatever monologue she was commencing, something about Brian, and galloping on.

“You couldn't leave it alone, could you? You saw it sitting there and the temptation was just too much. What were you thinking? ‘This’ll show him?’ Where is it? The dumpster out back? It’s in pieces, isn’t it? That’s why there’s dust everywhere. Well, I’ve got news for you, honey: it wasn’t mine. I didn’t make it. I don’t know who did. But you can be sure, once whoever that is comes looking for it, I'll be sure to send him straight to you. Do Not Pass Go, Do Not Collect Two Hundred Dollars. You wasted your time. Great job.” He was panting, his head splitting, his shoulder stabbing.

Kelly said, “Are you done?” When he didn’t answer, she continued, “Good. I don’t know what the hell that was about, but I’m almost glad I heard it. It'll make what I have to say that much easier. Brian’s spent the past two nights afraid to sleep and, when, he does fall asleep, he wakes screaming with night terrors. Do you want to know what he’s afraid of? It’s kind of interesting, actually. Last night, he told me he’d seen your head encased in that stupid Darth Vader mask. It’s gotten so bad I’ve had to make an appointment for him to see a psychiatrist. I was calling to discuss all this with you. I was hoping you might be able to talk to Brian about it, as well, since that’s really your thing with him. Obviously, I was mistaken.”

“Wait—”

“I'm talking now. You had your little rant, now it’s my turn. It’s clear you've got something going on—maybe it’s another woman; maybe it’s your job; I don’t know. Whatever it is, it’s obviously affecting your judgment. For the time being—until you work out whatever it is—I think it might be better if Liam and Brian have some time away from you.”

“Time—what are you talking about? I see them one day a week as it is.”

“And look how you spent that.”

“It was a movie, for God’s sake.”

“It’s a hundred and fifty dollars an hour on Dr. Hawkins’s couch, and I won't even bother asking you to chip in any of it. You should be paying all of it.”

“I should have to foot the bill for your overreaction? The kid saw a scary movie—it happens. He'll get over it.”

“See—that’s the attitude that concerns me.”

“You can’t keep the boys from me.”

“Oh? What're you going to do? Sue me? Go ahead.”

Dennis was threatening to do that very thing when she hung up on him.

Because of Kelly’s call, he was late for class, and, after he'd arrived, completely unprepared—the ten minute walk he’d planned to employ plotting the day’s lesson had been given over instead to the cloud of anger that enveloped him. Whatever else he could blame her for, though, it wasn’t her fault that, in answer to his question of how many people had read the day’s assignment, less than a third of the students raised their hands. He shouldn't have been as surprised as he was—for that matter, he hadn't (re)read Schiller’s *Letters*. In fact, he should have been glad for the excuse to forestall Schiller for another couple of days and tasked the students with some variety of glorified busy work. However clear this would be to him later, at the sight of that scattering of hands, the anger that had dropped away from him rose in a tower of steam. He wouldn't remember everything he said to them, but he would know it began with, “What the fuck?” and ended with, “Get your asses out of here. You disgust me.” In between, he managed to include a condemnation of their rank stupidity, to tell a student who tried to defend her failure to complete the work to shut the hell up, and to shout down another student—the one he privately considered his good student and who had done the reading—when she told him to chill out, it wasn’t a big deal. As the students hurried out the door, one of them attempted to ask about his final paper. Dennis told him to shut the fuck up and stop bothering him. Dumb—he had known what he was doing was dumb from the second sentence out of his mouth. It wasn’t as if he would derive any satisfaction from indulging his anger, as if the students would look anything but indignant or sullen, as if any of them would apologize. It was more that he had committed to the part, and had to play it through. Nor did his performance appease his anger in any appreciable way; it only piled a dollop of embarrassment on top of it.

Which put him in the perfect frame of mind for the e-mail awaiting him from Nate Williams. Whatever thrill rushed up his spine at the sight of it in his in-box died the moment he opened it and started reading. “Dennis,” Nate had written, “What is this shit? You're supposed to be making art, not horror movie knock-offs. If you want a career in costumes, switch to latex

and move to Hollywood. If you want to be an artist, DO BETTER.” Dennis sagged backward in his chair, all the anger let out of him by the punctures his advisor’s sentences had made. What? Had Nate actually looked at the pictures Dennis had sent him? He couldn't have—at least, not very closely. He clicked the reply icon, and paused with his hands outstretched over the keyboard like a composer ready to strike up a tune. What is this shit? Horror movie knock-ofts? DO BETTER?

His fingers pounded the keys. “You son of a bitch—You wouldn't know talent if it bit you in the ass. Fuck you and your small-minded ideas of art.” Stomach churning with dread and elation, he sent the message.

Given the four-car pileup that was his life this morning, Dennis wasn’t especially taken aback when the fifth and final vehicle plowed into the heap. On his way home, he detoured by the video store, planning to catch Lena and invite her back to see the Face after work. He hadn't lost his work, that was the important thing. Together with the register tape and the pages from his sketch pad, he had enough material for a spot in a show (though not Nate’s). So what if he were burning bridges while he was still on them? Maybe that was what he needed. Maybe Lena would have what he needed.

He found her leaning over the counter, talking to a guy with a black mohawk like a rooster’s comb, wearing a faded black trenchcoat, black jeans, and black Doc Martens. The tilt of Lena’s head, the half-smile on her lips, the arch of her eyebrows, all told Dennis that, however much she might (or might not) have been flirting with him the day before, here was the object of her desire. In the background, *Camille Claudel* played on the in-store TV. From the corner of her eye, Lena saw him and, turning, said, “Dennis! There’s someone I'd like you to meet. This is Louis.”

The mohawk swiveled in his direction, and Dennis saw that Louis’s left brow was full of rings, as was his left ear. He nodded at Dennis. “Hey. What’d you do to your head, man?”

“Accident,” Dennis said, walking past him to the back office. Lena followed to the doorway. While Dennis rummaged through the desk drawers for a sheet of paper, she said, “So, what brings you here? Checking up on me?”

There was a legal pad under a stack of copies of *Premiere*. “Actually,” he said, sliding the pad out, “no.”

“Okay.”

“I’m quitting.” He tore the top page from the pad.

“What? Why?”

He shrugged.

“I don’t understand. Is something wrong? Do you have another job?”

“No.” He found a pen, wrote the date at the top of the paper. “Don't you have something to be doing?”

“Whatever.” When he looked up, the doorway was empty. He wrote, “I QUIT,” in block letters, signed and printed his name beneath them, and left the paper on the desk. Lena was straightening videos in the New Releases section; Louis was gone. Dennis didn't say anything to her as he left the store, nor she to him.

Louis was standing outside, smoking. “Take care,” he said through a mouthful of smoke.

“Fuck off,” Dennis replied.

10

The Face consisted of a series of slender aluminum strips Dennis had woven into an irregular pattern, bending the strips at random intervals to create an even more asymmetric design. The bottom of the piece melted into a cluster of long metal shards like the fronds of an anemone. There were no eyes to speak of, only a trio of gaps in the weave meant to suggest them, above which protruded a half-dozen hooks and barbs. The entire surface of the face was dotted with jags and twists of metal that made handling it a tricky affair.

Dennis sat in his living room, on the futon, the Face in his hands, his own features a splintered impression on its surface. Returning from the wreckage of the morning, he had been pleased to find that the sight of the Face, which he had left propped on the futon, had produced the same effect as had its inspiration: *Mine*. He had fixed a lunch of store-brand peanut butter and

jelly on cheap white bread, which he had eaten standing at the kitchen counter and which he had washed down with a glass of water. Afterward, he had lifted the Face from the futon—gingerly—and sat down with it.

His mind was not so much blank as it was a jumble of white noise, a station he couldn't tune in. He was aware that he had done more than burn his bridges; he had dynamited them, sent asphalt and steel flying in all directions. Suicidal, yes, but also honest, a divesting of every one of his illusions, each lie that tried to reassure him his life was not the failure it in fact was. Useless to pretend it was anything else, that he could escape from it if he could flee far enough away, Tahiti, Thailand, Terra del Fuego. It was like a snake's scraping its old, dead skin away on a sharp rock.

The pain in his head had quieted, but his shoulder throbbed worse than ever. The solution he'd thought he'd effected to that hadn't succeeded, either. Once more, the skin was hot, and swollen, besides. He recalled his hallucination of the gray snake erupting from the wound. What a perfect symbol for the decay of his soul. He supposed he should unbutton his shirt, inspect his shoulder, but really, what was the point? He would recover or he would not. No doubt, it was a side effect of his resurgent infection, but Dennis felt on the verge of some great revelation, a negative epiphany that would fulfill the morning's ruin. He could almost sense it pressing on his skin, a great, pale emptiness. There was only one thing left to happen—all he had to do was discover what it was.

He turned the Face over. On the inside, it was smooth, free of sharp protrusions. He raised the sculpture towards him, his nostrils and mouth filling with the rich odor of metal. It fit the contours of his face like a mask. Dennis closed his eyes, letting the metal's cool flow into him. *Here*, he thought. *Here*.

And vomited, the contents of his stomach jetting over the Face's interior. His stomach convulsed as if it were trying to force itself up his throat. Gagging, his mouth and nostrils full of vomit, his eyes streaming tears, Dennis dropped the Face, slicing his fingers in a dozen places. He vomited again, doubling over, and again, toppling off the couch onto the floor, and again. The reek of peanut butter and stomach acid and what smelled like antifreeze clouded the air. His mouth was full of vomit thick as oatmeal; he spat out a wad of it. The room was an Abstract Impressionist jumble. He

drew the back of a hand across his eyes. The Face lay canted beside him, its sides dripping ropy vomit. As he watched, the strands of vomit, which was a flat, steel color, stretched to the floor, puddled on it, and began writhing towards one another.

Eyes bulging, Dennis sat bolt upright. The vomit pooled on and around the futon, streaking his shirt and pants, was seething; rife, he saw, with tiny snakes. They were thin as electrical wire, gray, capped by heads like pointed arrows. “Oh, no,” he said, “oh, no. No way. No fucking way,” but he could taste them squirming on his tongue. His mind swayed. He jammed his fingers into his mouth, trying to sweep them out, and vomited over his hand. He choked, spat, shook his hand frantically. The snakes stretched and groped towards each other, braiding themselves into longer and longer strands whose goal was clear: the Face. Dennis tried to stand, slipped, settled for crawling. Something tickled his ankle. He kicked at it.

He traveled maybe four feet, and the wound in his shoulder split open in a thunderclap of agony. With a cry, he collapsed where he was, doing his best to fall on his right side. Fireworks of pain—a Fourth of July celebration—popped across his chest and back. Something was moving—Dear God, something was wriggling across his chest, pressing up against his shirt from the inside. He could see the fabric bulging in a dozen different spots. His left arm was useless, paralyzed by the explosions detonating up and down his nerves. He fumbled with his shirt buttons with his right hand, his fingers shaking so badly he gave up, grabbed his collar and tore the shirt open, buttons skipping across the floor.

What he saw made him groan, a deep utterance of fear and distress. A nest of gray snakes reached around his chest like the petals of some obscene flower, their tails all descending into the open wound in his shoulder. Some of them waved their pointed heads as if testing the air; others appeared to be slithering back under his skin. “Jesus,” Dennis said. “Oh, Jesus fuck.” What remained of his sanity was breaking up, washing away under the torrent of events.

Beyond his feet, he saw that the snakes had coalesced into a pair of coiling masses that sought out the Face, lifted it between them, and began carrying it in his direction. In response to its approach, the serpents on his chest—which a small part of his mind noticed were segmented, their texture more

alloy than flesh—raised their heads in unison, then dove into his chest. Dennis jerked as if he were being electrocuted, his free hand slapping the floor, his legs spasming. The pain was so bad he couldn't even scream. Worse, he could feel them inside him, pushing around and through his organs, his bones. His skin was rippling, patches of it growing brittle, papery, flaking away, revealing something wet and shining underneath.

The Face was almost at his head, borne aloft by a pair of undulating coils whose ends were blending with it, flowing over and into it. The skin was crackling off his body, dropping to the floor in a rain of dust, leaving chromium geometry in its place. He knew what was happening—useless to deny it when he could see the Face descending towards him, its interior reaching to embrace him. In a matter of minutes—moments—the process that had been unleashed on him would have reached its climax, and all that would remain of him would be a new Discovery, carved out of his flesh and talent. His nerves were shorting out, so many power lines overwhelmed by the storm. At least there was that to be thankful for. If only he weren't so afraid of the Face drawing near, the snakes tickling his nose, his cheeks, his eyelids, eager for him.

In the end, all that would remain of him would be a collection of metal lines that would wait somewhere—he couldn't name the location (*the Negative Zone*), though he suspected it might be on the flank of an unimaginably long serpent that plunged across cold emptiness—until summoned by someone else, someone whose gall and venom would prove a suitable breeding ground for its strange life cycle. When that happened, the Face he had made, that was even now joining itself to him more intimately than any lover, insinuating itself into his mouth, his nose, under his eyelids, his ears, would be discarded, left for some anonymous garbage man to pick up, ponder, and throw in the trash.

Technicolor

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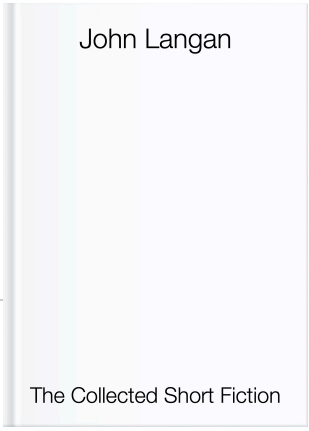

Come on, say it out loud with me: "And Darkness and Decay and the Red Death held illimitable dominion over all." Look at that sentence. Who says Edgar Allan Poe was a lousy stylist? Thirteen words—good number for a horror story, right? Although it's not so much a story as a masque. Yes, it's about a masque, but it is a masque, too. Of course, you all know what a masque is. If you didn't, you looked it up in your dictionaries, because that's what you do in a senior seminar. Anyone?

No, not a play, not exactly. Yes? Good, okay, "masquerade" is one sense of the word, a ball whose guests attend in costume. Anyone else?

Yes, very nice, nicely put. The masque does begin in the sixteenth century. It's the entertainment of the elite, and originally, it's a combination of pantomime and dance. Pantomime? Right—think "mime." The idea is to perform without words, gesturally, to let the movements of your body tell the story. You do that, and you dance, and there's your show. Later on, there's dialogue and other additions, but I think it's this older sense of the word the story intends. Remember that tall, silent figure at the end.

I'm sorry? Yes, good point. The two kinds of masque converge.

Back to that sentence, though. Twenty-two syllables that break almost perfectly in half, ten and twelve, "And Darkness and Decay and the Red Death" and "held illimitable dominion over all." A group of short words, one and two syllables each, takes you through the first part of the sentence, then they give way to these long, almost luxurious words, "illimitable dominion." The rhythm—you see how complex it is? You ride along on these short words, bouncing up and down, alliterating from one *d* to the next, and suddenly you're mired in those Latinate polysyllables. All the

momentum goes out of your reading; there's just enough time for the final pair of words, which are short, which is good, and you're done.

Wait, just let me—no, all right, what was it you wanted to say?

Exactly, yes, you took the words out of my mouth. The sentence does what the story does, carries you along through the revelry until you run smack-dab into that tall figure in the funeral clothes. Great job.

One more observation about the sentence, then I promise it's on to the story itself. I know you want to talk about Prospero's castle, all those colored rooms. Before we do, however, the four *d*'s. We've mentioned already, there are a lot of *d* sounds in these thirteen words. They thread through the line, help tie it together. They also draw our attention to four words in particular. The first three are easy to recognize: they're capitalized, as well. Darkness, Decay, Death. The fourth? Right, dominion. Anyone want to take a stab at why they're capitalized?

Yes? Well… okay, sure, it makes them into proper nouns. Can you take that a step farther? What kind of proper nouns does it make them? What's happened to the Red Death in the story? It's gone from an infection you can't see to a tall figure wandering around the party. Personification, good. Darkness, Decay, (the Red) Death: the sentence personifies them; they're its trinity, its unholy trinity, so to speak. And this godhead holds dominion, what the dictionary defines as "sovereign authority" over all. Not only the prince's castle, not only the world of the story, but all, you and me.

In fact, in a weird sort of way, this is the story of the incarnation of one of the persons of this awful trinity.

All right, moving on, now. How about those rooms? Actually, how about the building those rooms are in, first? I've been calling it a castle, but it isn't, is it? It's "castellated," which is to say, castle-like, but it's an abbey, a monastery. I suppose it makes sense to want to wait out the Red Death in a place like an abbey. After all, it's both removed from the rest of society and well fortified. And we shouldn't be too hard on the prince and his followers for retreating there. It's not the first time this has happened, in literature or in life. Anyone read *The Decameron*? Boccaccio? It's a collection of one hundred stories told by ten people, five women and five men, who have

sequestered themselves in, I'm pretty sure it's a convent, to wait out the plague ravaging Florence. The Black Death, that one.

If you consider that the place in which we find the seven rooms is a monastery, a place where men are supposed to withdraw from this world to meditate on the next, its rooms appear even stranger. What's the set-up? Seven rooms, yes, thank you, I believe I just said that. Running east to west, good. In a straight line? No. There's a sharp turn every twenty or thirty yards, so that you can see only one room at a time. So long as they follow that east-to-west course, you can lay the rooms out in any form you like. I favor steps, like the ones that lead the condemned man to the chopping block, but that's just me.

Hang on, hang on, we'll get to the colors in a second. We need to stay with the design of the rooms for a little longer. Not everybody gets this the first time through. There are a pair of windows, Gothic windows, which means what? That they're long and pointed at the top. The windows are opposite one another, and they look out on, anybody? Not exactly: a chandelier hangs down from the ceiling. It is a kind of light, though. No, a candelabrum holds candles. Anyone else? A brazier, yes, there's a brazier sitting on a tripod outside either window. They're… how would you describe a brazier? Like a big metal cup, a bowl, that you fill with some kind of fuel and ignite. Wood, charcoal, oil. To be honest, I'm not as interested in the braziers as I am in where they're located. Outside the windows, right, but where outside the windows? Maybe I should say, What is outside the windows? Corridors, yes, there are corridors to either side of the rooms, and it's along these that the braziers are stationed. Just like our classroom. Not the tripods, of course, and I guess what's outside our windows is more a gallery than a corridor, since it's open to the parking lot on the other side. All right, all right, so I'm stretching a bit here, but have you noticed, the room has seven windows? One for each color in Prospero's Abbey. Go ahead, count them.

So here we are in this strange abbey, one that has a crazy zigzag suite of rooms with corridors running beside them. You could chalk the location's details up to anti-Catholic sentiment; there are critics who have argued that anti-Catholic prejudice is the secret engine driving Gothic literature. No, I don't buy it, not in this case. Sure, there are stained-glass windows, but

they're basically tinted glass. There's none of the iconography you'd expect if this were anti-Catholic propaganda, no statues or paintings. All we have is that enormous clock in the last room, the mother of all grandfather clocks. Wait a minute…

What about those colors, then? Each of the seven rooms is decorated in a single color that matches the stained glass of its windows. From east to west, we go from blue to purple to green to orange to white to violet to—to the last room, where there's a slight change. The windows are red, but the room itself is done in black. There seems to be some significance to the color sequence, but what that is—well, this is why we have literature professors, right? (No snickering.) Not to mention, literature students. I've read through your responses to the homework assignment, and there were a few interesting ideas as to what those colors might mean. Of course, most of you connected them to times of the day, blue as dawn, black as night, the colors in between morning, noon, early afternoon, that kind of thing. Given the east-west layout, it makes a certain amount of sense. A few more of you picked up on that connection to time in a slightly different way, and related the colors to times of the year, or the stages in a person's life. In the process, some clever arguments were made. Clever, but not, I'm afraid, too convincing.

What! What's wrong! What is it! Are you all—oh, them. Oh for God's sake. When you screamed like that, I thought—I don't know what I thought. I thought I'd need a new pair of trousers. Those are a couple of graduate students I've enlisted to help me with a little presentation I'll be putting up shortly. Yes, I can understand how the masks could startle you. They're just generic white masks; I think they found them downtown somewhere. It was their idea: once I told them what story we would be discussing, they immediately hit on wearing the masks. To tell the truth, I half expected they'd show up sporting the heads of enormous fanged monsters. Those are relatively benign.

Yes, I suppose they do resemble the face the Red Death assumes for its costume. No blood splattered on them, though.

If I could have your attention up here, again. Pay no attention to that man behind the curtain. Where was I? Your homework, yes, thank you. Right, right. Let's see… oh—I know. A couple of you read the colors in more

original ways. I made a note of them somewhere—here they are. One person interpreted the colors as different states of mind, beginning with blue as tranquil and ending with black as despair, with stops for jealousy (green, naturally) and passion (white, as in white-hot) along the way. Someone else made the case for the colors as—let me make sure I have the phrasing right—"phases of being."

Actually, that last one's not bad. Although the writer could be less obtuse; clarity, people, academic writing needs to be clear. Anyway, the gist of the writer's argument is that each color is supposed to take you through a different state of existence, blue at one end of the spectrum representing innocence, black at the other representing death. Death as a state of being—that's… provocative. Which is not to say it's correct, but it's headed in the right direction.

I know, I know: Which is? The answer requires some explanation. Scratch that. It requires a boatload of explanation. That's why I have Tweedledee and Tweedledum setting up outside. (Don't look! They're almost done.) It's also why I lowered the screen behind me for the first time this semester. There are some images I want to show you, and they're best seen in as much detail as possible. If I can remember what the Media Center people told me… click this… then this…

Voilà!

Matthew Brady's *Portrait* of Edgar, taken 1848, his last full year alive. It's the best-known picture of him; were I to ask you to visualize him, this is what your minds' eyes would see. That forehead, that marble expanse—yes, his hair does make the top of his head look misshapen, truncated. As far as I know, it wasn't. The eyes—I suppose everyone comments on the eyes, slightly shadowed under those brows, the lids lowered just enough to suggest a certain detachment, even dreaminess. It's the mouth I notice, how it tilts up ever so slightly at the right corner. It's hard to see; you have to look closely. A strange mixture of arrogance, even contempt, and something else, something that might be humor, albeit of the bitter variety. It wouldn't be that much of a challenge to suggest colors for the picture, but somehow black and white is more fitting, isn't it? Odd, considering how much color there is in the fiction. I've often thought all those old Roger Corman adaptations, the ones Vincent Price starred in—whatever their other faults,

one thing they got exactly right was Technicolor, which was the perfect way to film these stories, just saturate the screen with the most vibrant colors you could find.

I begin with the *Portrait* as a reminder. This is the man. His hand scraped the pen across the paper, brought the story we've been discussing into existence word by word. Not creation *ex nihilo,* out of nothing, creation… if my Latin were better, or existent, I'd have a fancier way to say out of the self, or out of the depths of the self, or—hey—out of the depth that is the self.

Moving on to my next portrait… Anyone?

I'm impressed. Not many people know this picture. Look closely, though. See it?

That's right: it isn't a painting. It's a photograph that's been tweaked to resemble a painting. The portrait it imitates is a posthumous representation of Virginia Clemm, Edgar's sweetheart and child bride. The girl in the photo? She'll be happy you called her a girl. That's my wife, Anna. Yes, I'm married. Why is that so hard to believe? We met many years ago, in a kingdom by the sea. From? "Annabel Lee," good. No, just Anna; although we did meet in the King of the Sea Arcade, on the Jersey shore. Seriously. She is slightly younger than I am. Four years, thank you very much. You people. For Halloween one year, we dressed up as Edgar and Virginia—pretty much from the start, it's been a running joke between us. In her case, the resemblance is striking.

As it so happened, yes we did attend a masquerade as the happy couple. That was where this photo was taken. One of the other guests was a professional photographer. I arranged the shot; he took it, then used a program on his computer to transform it into a painting. The guy was quite pleased with it; apparently it's on his website. I'm showing it to you because… well, because I want to. There's probably a connection I could draw between masquerade, the suppression of one identity in order to invoke and inhabit another, that displacement, and the events of our story, but that's putting the cart about a mile before the horse. She'll like it that you thought she was a girl, though; that'll make her night. Those were her

cookies, by the way. Are there any left? Not even the sugar cookies? Figures.

Okay, image number three. If you can name this one, you get an A for the class and an autographed picture of the Pope. Put your hand down, you don't know. How about the rest of you?

Just us crickets…

It's just as well; I don't have that picture of the Pope anymore. This gentleman is Prosper Vauglais. Or so he claimed. There's a lot about this guy no one's exactly sure of, like when he was born, or where, or when and where he died. He showed up in Paris in the late eighteen-teens and caused something of a stir. For one winter, he appeared at several of the less reputable *salons* and a couple of the… I wouldn't go so far as to say more reputable—maybe less disreputable ones.

His "deal"? His deal, as you put it, was that he claimed to have been among the quarter of a million soldiers under Napoleon Bonaparte's personal command when, in June of 1812, the Emperor decided to invade Russia. As some of you may remember from your European history classes, this was a very bad idea. The worst. Roughly a tenth of Napoleon's forces survived the campaign; I want to say the number who limped back into France was something like twenty-two thousand. In and of itself, being a member of that group is nothing to sneeze at. For Vauglais, though, it was only the beginning. During the more or less running battles the French army fought as it retreated from what had been Moscow, Vauglais was separated from his fellows, struck on the head by a Cossack's sword, and left for dead in a snow bank. When he came to, he was alone, and a storm had blown up. Prosper had no idea where he was; he assumed still Russia, which wasn't too encouraging. Any Russian peasants or what have you who came across French soldiers, even those trying to surrender, tended to hack them to death with farm implements first and ask questions later. So when Prosper strikes out in what he hopes is the approximate direction of France, he isn't what you'd call terribly optimistic.

Nor is his pessimism misplaced. Within a day, he's lost, frozen, and starving, wandering around the inside of a blizzard like the sort you read about, white-out conditions, shrieking wind, unbearable cold. The blow to

his head isn’t helping matters, either. His vision keeps going in and out of focus. Sometimes he feels so nauseated he can barely stand, let alone continue walking. Once in a while, he’ll see a light shining in the window of a farmhouse, but he gives these a wide berth. Another day, and he’ll be closer to death than he was even at the worst battles he saw—than he was when that saber connected with his skull. His skin, which has been numb since not long after he started his trek, has gone from pale to white to this kind of blue-gray, and it’s hardened, as if there’s a crust of ice on it. He can’t feel his pulse through it. His breath, which had been venting from his nose and mouth in long white clouds, seems to have slowed to a trickle, if that. He can’t see anything; although, with the storm continuing around him, maybe that isn’t so strange. He’s not cold anymore—or it’s not that he isn’t cold so much as it is that the cold isn’t torturing him the way it was. At some point, the cold moved inside him, took up residence just beneath his heart, and once that happened, that transition was accomplished, the temperature outside became of much less concern.

There’s a moment—while Vauglais is staggering around the way you do when you’re trying to walk in knee-high snow without snowshoes, pulling each foot free, swiveling it forward, crashing it through the snow in front of you, then repeating the process with your other foot—there’s a moment when he realizes he’s dead. He isn’t sure when it happened. Some time in the last day or so. It isn’t that he thinks he’s in some kind of afterlife, that he’s wandering around a frozen hell. No, he know he’s still stuck somewhere in western Russia. It’s just that, now he’s dead. He isn’t sure why he hasn’t stopped moving. He considers doing so, giving his body a chance to catch up to his apprehension of it, but decides against it. For one thing, he isn’t sure it would work, and suppose while he’s standing in place, waiting to fall over, someone finds him, one of those peasants, or a group of Russian soldiers? Granted, if he’s already dead, they can’t hurt him, but the prospect of being cut to pieces while still conscious is rather horrifying. And for another thing, Prosper isn’t ready to quit walking. So he keeps moving forward. Dimly, the way you might hear a noise when you’re fast asleep, he’s aware that he isn’t particularly upset at finding himself dead and yet moving, but after recent events, maybe that isn’t so surprising.

Time passes; how much, he can't say. The blizzard doesn't lift, but it thins, enough for Vauglais to make out trees, evergreens. He's in a forest, a pretty dense one, from what he can see, which may explain why the storm has lessened. The trees are… there's something odd about the trees. For as close together as they are, they seem to be in almost perfect rows, running away into the snow on either side of him. In and of itself, maybe that isn't strange. Could be, he's wandered into some kind of huge formal garden. But there's more to it. When he looks at any particular tree, he sees, not so much bark and needles as black, black lines like the strokes of a paintbrush, or the scratches of a pen, forming the approximation of an evergreen. It's as if he's seeing a sketch of a tree, an artist's estimate. The black lines appear to be moving, almost too quickly for him to notice; it's as if he's witnessing them being drawn and re-drawn. Prosper has a sudden vision of himself from high above, a small, dark spot in the midst of long rows of black on white, a stray bit of punctuation loose among the lines of an unimaginable text.

Eventually, Vauglais reaches the edge of the forest. Ahead, there's a building, the title to this page he's been traversing. The blizzard has kicked up again, so he can't see much, but he has the impression of a long, low structure, possibly stone. It could be a stable, could be something else. Although there are no religious symbols evident, Prosper has an intuition the place is a monastery. He should turn right or left, avoid the building: the Russian clergy haven't taken any more kindly to the French invaders than the Russian people. Instead, he raises one stiff leg and strikes off toward it. It isn't that he's compelled to do so, that he's in the grip of a power that he can't resist, or that he's decided to embrace the inevitable, surrender to death. He isn't even especially curious about the stone structure. Forward is just a way to go, and he does.

As he draws closer, Vauglais notices that the building isn't becoming any easier to distinguish. If anything, it's more indistinct, harder to make out. If the trees behind him were rough drawing, this place is little more than a scribble, a jumble of lines whose form is as much in the eye of the beholder as anything. When a figure in a heavy coat and hat separates from the structure and begins to trudge in his direction, it's as if a piece of the place has broken off. Prosper can't see the man's face, all of which except the

eyes is hidden by the folds of a heavy scarf, but the man lifts one mittened hand and gestures for Vauglais to follow him inside, which the Frenchman does.

And… no one knows what happens next.

What do I mean? I'm sorry: wasn't I speaking English? No one knows what happened inside the stone monastery. Prosper writes a fairly detailed account of the events leading up to that point, which is where the story I'm telling you comes from, but when the narrative reaches this moment, it breaks off with Vauglais's declaration that he's told us as much as he can. End of story.

All right, yes, there are hints of what took place during the five years he was at the Abbey. That was what he called the building, the Abbey. Every so often, Prosper would allude to his experiences in it, and sometimes someone would note his remarks in a letter or diary. From combing through these kinds of documents, it's possible to assemble and collate Vauglais's comments into a glimpse of his life with the Fraternity. Again, his name. There were maybe seven of them, or seven after he arrived, or there were supposed to be seven. He referred to "Brother Red," once; to "The White Brother" at another time. Were the others named Blue, Purple, Green, Orange, and Violet? We can't say; although, as an assumption, it isn't completely unreasonable. They spent their days in pursuit of something Vauglais called The Great Work; he also referred to it as The Transumption. This seems to have involved generous amounts of quiet meditation combined with the study of certain religious texts—Prosper doesn't name them, but they may have included some Gnostic writings.

The Gnostics? I don't suppose you would have heard of them. How many of you actually got to church? As I feared. What would Sr. Mary Mary say? The Gnostics were a religious sect who sprang up around the same time as the early Christians. I guess they would have described themselves as the true Christians, the ones who understood what Jesus' teachings were really about. They shared sacred writings with the more orthodox Christians, but they had their own books, too. They were all about *gnosis*, knowledge, especially of the self. For them, the secret to what lay outside the self was what lay inside the self. The physical world was evil, a wellspring of illusions and delusions. Gnostics tended to retreat to the desert, lead lives of

contemplation. Unlike the mainstream Christians, they weren't much on formal organization; that, and the fact that those Christians did everything in their power to shunt the Gnostics and their teachings to the margins and beyond, branding some of their ideas as heretical, helps explain why they pretty much vanished from the religious scene.

"Pretty much," though, isn't the same thing as "completely." (I know: such precise, scientific terminology.) Once in a while, Gnostic ideas would resurface, usually in the writings of some fringe figure or another. Rumors persist of Gnostic secret societies, occasionally as part of established groups like the Jesuits or the Masons. Which begs the question, Was Vauglais's Fraternity one of these societies, a kind of order of Gnostic monks? The answer to which is—

Right: no one knows. There's no record of any official—which is to say, Russian Orthodox—religious establishment: no monastery, no church, in the general vicinity of where we think Prosper was. Of course, a bunch of Gnostic monastics would hardly constitute anything resembling an official body, and so might very well fly under the radar. That said, the lack of proof against something does not count as evidence for it.

That's true. He could have been making the whole thing up.

Transumption? It's a term from classical rhetoric. It refers to the elision of a chain of associations. Sorry—sometimes I like to watch your heads explode. Let's say you're writing your epic poem about the fall of Troy, and you describe one of the Trojans being felled by an arrow. Let's say that arrow was made from the wood of a tree in a sacred grove; let's say, too, that that grove was planted by Hercules, who scattered some acorns there by accident. Now let's say that, when your Trojan hero sinks to the ground, drowning in his own blood, one of his friends shouts, "Curse the careless hand of Hercules!" That statement is an example of transumption. You've jumped from one link in a chain of associations back several. Make sense?

Yes, well, what does a figure of speech have to do with what was going on inside that Abbey?

Oh, wait—hold on for a moment. My two assistants are done with their set-up. Let me give them a signal… Five more minutes? All right, good, yes. I have no idea if they understood me. Graduate students.

Don’t worry about what’s on the windows. Yes, yes, those are lamps. Can I have your attention up here, please? Thank you. Let me worry about Campus Security. Or my masked friends out there will.

Okay—let’s skip ahead a little. We were talking about The Transumption, a.k.a. The Great Work. There’s nothing in his other references to the Abbey that offers any clue as to what he may have meant by it. However, there is an event that may shed some light on things.

It occurs in Paris, toward the end of February. An especially fierce winter scours the streets, sends people scurrying from the shelter of one building to another. Snow piles on top of snow, all of it turning dirty gray. Where there isn’t snow, there’s ice, inches thick in places. The sky is gray, the sun a pale blur that puts in a token appearance for a few hours a day. Out into this glacial landscape, Prosper leads half a dozen men and women from one of the city’s less disreputable *salons.* Their destination: the catacombs, the long tunnels that run under Paris. They’re quite old, the catacombs. In some places, the walls are stacked with bones, from when they were used as a huge ossuary. (That’s a place to hold the bones of the dead.) They’re also fairly crowded, full of beggars, the poor, searching for shelter from the ravages of the season. Vauglais has to take his party deep underground before they can find a location that’s suitably empty. It’s a kind of side-chamber, roughly circular, lined with shelves full of skull piled on skull. The skulls make a clicking sound, from the rats shuffling through them. Oh yes, there are plenty of rats down here.

Prosper fetches seven skulls off the shelves and piles them in the center of the room. He opens a large flask he’s carried with him, and pours its contents over the bones. It’s lamp oil, which he immediately ignites with his torch. He sets the torch down and gathers the members of the *salon* around the skulls. They join hands.

It does sound as if he’s leading a séance, doesn’t it? The only difference is, he isn’t asking the men and women with him to think of a beloved one who’s passed beyond. Nor does he request they focus on a famous ghost. Instead, Vauglais tells them to look at the flames licking the bones in front of them. Study those flames, he says, watch them as they trace the contours of the skulls. Follow the flames over the cheeks, around the eyes, up the

brows. Gaze into those eyes, into the emptiness inside the fire. Fall through the flames; fall into that blackness.

He's hypnotizing them, of course—Mesmerizing would be the more historically accurate term. Under the sway of his voice, the members of the *salon* enter a kind of vacancy. They're still conscious—well, they're still perceiving, still aware of that heap of bones burning in front of them, the heavy odor of the oil, the quiet roar of the flames—but their sense of their selves, the accumulation of memory and inclination that defines each from the other, is gone.

Now Prosper is telling them to think of something new. Picture the flesh that used to clothe these skulls, he says. Warm and smooth, flushed with life. Look closely—it glows, doesn't it? It shines with its living. Watch! watch—it's dying. It's growing cold, pale. The glow, that dim light floating at the very limit of the skin—it's changing, drifting up, losing its radiance. See—there!—ah, it's dead. Cool as a cut of meat. Gray. The light is gone. Or is it? Is that another light? Yes, yes it is; but it is not the one we have watched dissipate. This is a darker glow. Indigo, that most elusive of the rainbow's hues. It curls over the dull skin like fog, and the flesh opens for it, first in little cracks, then in long windows, and then in wide doorways. As the skin peels away, the light thickens, until it is as if the bone is submerged in a bath of indigo. The light is not done moving; it pours into the air above the skull, over all the skulls. Dark light is rising from them, twisting up in thick streams that seek one another, that wrap around one another, that braid a shape. It is the form of a man, a tall man dressed in black robes, his face void as a corpse's, his head crowned with black flame —

Afterwards, when the half-dozen members of the *salon* compare notes, none of them can agree on what, if anything, they saw while under Vauglais's sway. One of them insists that nothing appeared. Three admit to what might have been a cloud of smoke, or a trick of the light. Of the remaining pair, one states flat-out that she saw the Devil. The other balks at any statement more elaborate than, "Monsieur Vauglais has shown me terrible joy." Whatever they do or don't see, it doesn't last very long. The oil Prosper doused the skulls with has been consumed. The fire dies away;

darkness rushes in to fill the gap. The trance in which Vauglais has held the *salon* breaks. There's a sound like wind rushing, then quiet.

A month after that expedition, Prosper disappeared from Paris. He had attempted to lead that same *salon* back into the catacombs for a second—well, whatever you'd call what he'd done. A summoning? (But what was he summoning?) Not surprisingly, the men and women of the *salon* declined his request. In a huff, Vauglais left them and tried to insert himself into a couple of even less disreputable *salons,* attempting to use gossip about his former associates as his price of admission. But either the secrets he knew weren't juicy enough—possible, but I suspect unlikely—or those other *salons* had heard about his underground investigations and decided they preferred the comfort of their drawing rooms. Then one of the men from that original *salon* raised questions about Prosper's military service—he claimed to have found a sailor who swore that he and Vauglais had been on an extended debauch in Morocco at the very time he was supposed to have been marching toward Moscow. That's the problem with being the flavor of the month: before you know it, the calendar's turned, and no one can remember what they found so appealing about you in the first place. In short order, there's talk about an official inquiry into Prosper's service record—probably more rumor than fact, but it's enough for Vauglais, and he departs Paris for parts unknown. No one sees him leave, just as no one saw him arrive. In the weeks that follow, there are reports of Prosper in Libya, Madagascar, but they don't disturb a single eyebrow. Years—decades later, when Gauguin's in Tahiti, he'll hear a story about a strange white man who came to the island a long time ago and vanished into its interior, and Vauglais's name will occur to him, but you can't even call that a legend. It's… a momentary association. Prosper Vauglais vanishes.

Well, not all of him. That's right: there's the account he wrote of his discovery of the Abbey.

I beg your pardon? Dead? Oh, right, yes. It's interesting—apparently, Prosper permitted a physician connected to the first *salon* he frequented to conduct a pretty thorough examination of him. According to Dr. Zumachin, Vauglais's skin was stubbornly pallid. No matter how much the doctor pinched or slapped it, Prosper's flesh remained the same gray-white. Not only that, it was cold, cold and hard, as if it were packed with ice. Although

Vauglais had to inhale in order to speak, his regular respiration was so slight as to be undetectable. It wouldn't fog the doctor's pocket mirror. And try as Zumachin might, he could not locate a pulse.

Sure, Prosper could have paid him off; aside from his part in this story, there isn't that much information on the good doctor. For what it's worth, most of the people who met Vauglais commented on his skin, its pallor, and, if they touched it, its coldness. No one else noted his breathing, or lack thereof, but a couple of the members of that last *salon* described him as extraordinarily still.

Okay, back to that book. Actually, wait. Before we do, let me bring this up on the screen…

I know—talk about something completely different. No, it's not a Rorschach test. It does look like it, though, doesn't it? Now if my friends outside will oblige me… and there we go. Amazing what a sheet of blue plastic and a high-power lamp can do. We might as well be in the east room of Prospero's Abbey.

Yes, the blue light makes it appear deeper—it transforms it from ink-spill to opening. Prosper calls it *"La Bouche,"* the Mouth. Some mouth, eh?

That's where the design comes from, Vauglais's book. The year after his disappearance, a small Parisian press whose biggest claim to fame was its unauthorized edition of the Marquis de Sade's *Justine* publishes Prosper's *L'Histoire de Mes Aventures dans L'Etendu Russe*, which translates something like, "The History of My Adventures in the Russian," either "Wilderness" or "Vastness." Not that anyone calls it by its title. The publisher, one Denis Prebend, binds Vauglais's essay between covers the color of a bruise after three or four days. Yes, that sickly, yellowy-green. Of course that's what catches everyone's attention, not the less-than-inspired title, and it isn't long before customers are asking for *"le livre verte,"* the green book. It's funny—it's one of those books that no one will admit to reading, but that goes through ten printings the first year after its appears.

Some of those copies do find their way across the Atlantic, very good. In fact, within a couple of months of its publication, there are at least three pirated translations of the green book circulating the booksellers of London,

and a month after that, they're available in Boston, New York, and Baltimore.

To return to the book itself for a moment—after that frustrating ending, there's a blank page, which is followed by seven more pages, each showing a separate design. What's above me on the screen is the first of them. The rest—well, let's not get ahead of ourselves. Suffice it to say, the initial verdict was that something had gone awry in the printing process, with the result that the *bouche* had become *bouché,* cloudy. A few scholars have even gone so far as to attempt to reconstruct what Prosper's original images must have been. Prebend, though—the publisher—swore that he'd presented the book exactly as he had been instructed.

For those of us familiar with abstract art, I doubt there's any great difficulty in seeing the black blot on the screen as a mouth. The effect—there used to be these books; they were full of what looked like random designs. If you held them the right distance from your face and let your eyes relax, almost to the point of going cross-eyed, all of a sudden, a picture would leap out of the page at you. You know what I'm talking about? Good. I don't know what the name for that effect is, but it's the nearest analogue I can come up with for what happens when you look at the Mouth under blue light—except that the image doesn't jump forward so much as sink back. The way it recedes—it's as if it extends, not just through the screen, or the wall behind it, but beyond all that, to the very substratum of things.

To tell the truth, I have no idea what's responsible for the effect. If you find this impressive, however…

Look at that: a new image and a fresh color. How's that for coordination? Good work, nameless minions. Vauglais named this *"Le Gardien,"* the Guardian. What's that? I suppose you could make an octopus out of it; although aren't there a few too many tentacles? True, it's close enough; it's certainly more octopus than squid. Do you notice… right. The tentacles, loops, whatever we call them, appear to be moving. Focus on any one in particular, and it stands still—but you can see movement out of the corner of your eye, can't you? Try to take in the whole, and you swear its arms are performing an intricate dance.

So the Mouth leads to the Guardian, which is waving its appendages in front of…

That green is bright after the purple, isn't it? Voila *"Le Récif,"* the Reef. Makes sense, a cuttlefish protecting a reef. I don't know: it's angular enough. Personally, I suspect this one is based on some kind of pun or word-play. *"Récif"* is one letter away from *"récit,"* story, and this reef comes to us as the result of a story; in some weird way, the reef may be the story. I realize that doesn't make any sense; I'm still working through it.

This image is a bit different from the previous two. Anyone notice how?

Exactly: instead of the picture appearing to move, the light itself seems to —I like your word, "shimmer." You could believe we're gazing through water. It's—not hypnotic, that's too strong, but it is soothing. Don't you think?

I'll take your yawn as a "yes." Very nice. What a way to preface a question. All right, all right. What is it that's keeping you awake?

Isn't it obvious? Apparently not.

Yes! Edgar read Prosper's book!

When? The best evidence is sometime in the early eighteen-thirties, after he'd relocated to Baltimore. He mentions hearing about the green book from one of his fellow cadets at West Point, but he doesn't secure his own copy until he literally stumbles upon one in a bookshop near Baltimore's inner harbor. He wrote a fairly amusing account of it in a letter to Virginia. The store was this long, narrow space located halfway down an alley; its shelves were stuffed past capacity with all sizes of books jammed together with no regard for their subject. Occasionally, one of the shelves would disgorge its contents without warning. If you were underneath or to the side of it, you ran the risk of substantial injury. Not to mention, the single aisle snaking into the shop's recesses was occupied at irregular intervals by stacks of books that looked as if a strong sneeze would send them tumbling down.

It's as he's attempting to maneuver around an especially tall tower of books, simultaneously trying to avoid jostling a nearby shelf, that Edgar's foot catches on a single volume he hadn't seen, sending him—and all books in the immediate vicinity—to the floor. There's a huge puff of dust; half a

dozen books essentially disintegrate. Edgar's sense of humor is such that he appreciates the comic aspect of a poet—as he styled himself—buried beneath a deluge of books. However, he insists on excavating the book that undid him.

The copy of Vauglais's essay he found was a fourth translation that had been done by a Boston publisher hoping to cash in on the popularity of the other editions. Unfortunately for him, the edition took longer to prepare than he'd anticipated—his translator was a Harvard professor who insisted on translating Prosper as accurately as he could. This meant an English version of Vauglais's essay that was a model of fidelity to the original French, but that wasn't ready until Prosper's story was last week's news. The publisher went ahead with what he titled *The Green Book of M. Prosper Vauglais* anyway, but he pretty much lost his shirt over the whole thing.

Edgar was so struck at having fallen over this book that he bought it on the spot. He spent the next couple of days reading and re-reading it, puzzling over its contents. As we've seen in "The Gold Bug" and "The Purloined Letter," this was a guy who liked a puzzle. He spent a good deal of time on the seven designs at the back of the book, convinced that their significance was right in front of him.

Speaking of those pictures, let's have another one. Assistants, if you please —

Hey, it's Halloween! Isn't that what you associate orange with? And especially an orange like this—this is the sun spilling the last of its late light, right before all the gaudier colors, the violets and pinks, splash out. You don't think of orange as dark, do you? I know I don't. Yet it is, isn't it? Is it the darkest of the bright colors? To be sure, it's difficult to distinguish the design at its center; the orange is filmy, translucent. There are a few too many curves for it to be the symbol for infinity; at least, I think there are. I want to say I see a pair of snakes wrapped around one another, but the coils don't connect in quite the right way. Vauglais's name for this was *"Le Coeur,"* the Heart, and also the Core, as well as the Height or the Depth, depending on usage. Obviously, we're cycling through the seven rooms from "The Masque of the Red Death"; obviously, too, I'm arguing that Edgar takes their colors from Prosper's book. In that schema, orange is at

the center, three colors to either side of it; in that sense, we have reached the heart, the core, the height or the depth. Of course, that core obscure the other one—or maybe not.

While you try to decide, let's return to Edgar. It's an overstatement to say that Vauglais obsesses him. When his initial attempt at deciphering the designs fails, he puts the book aside. Remember, he's a working writer at a time when the American economy really won't support one—especially one with Edgar's predilections—so there are always more things to be written in the effort to keep the wolf a safe distance from the door. Not to mention, he's falling in love with the girl who will become his wife. At odd moments over the next decade, though, he retrieves Prosper's essay and spends a few hours poring over it. He stares at its images until they're grooved into the folds of his brain. During one long afternoon in 1840, he's sitting with the book open to the Mouth, a glass of water on the table to his right. The sunlight streaming in the windows splinters on the waterglass, throwing a rainbow across the page in front of him. The arc of the images that's under the blue strip of the bow looks different; it's as if that portion of the paper has sunk into the book—behind the book. A missing and apparently lost piece of the puzzle snaps into place, and Edgar starts up from the table, knocking over his chair in the process. He races through the house, searching for a piece of blue glass. The best he can do is a heavy blue jug, which he almost drops in his excitement. He returns to the book, angles the jug to catch the light, and watches as the Mouth opens. He doesn't waste any time staring at it; shifting the jug to his right hand, he flips to the next image with his left, positions the glass jug over the Guardian, and… nothing. For a moment, he's afraid he's imagined the whole thing, had an especially vivid waking dream. But when he pages back to the Mouth and directs the blue light onto it, it clearly recedes. Edgar wonders if the effect he's observed is unique to the first image, then his eye lights on the glass of water, still casting its rainbow. He sets the jug on the floor, turns the page, and slides the book closer to the glass.

That's how Edgar spends the rest of the afternoon, matching the designs in the back of Vauglais's book to the colors that activate them. The first four come relatively quickly; the last three take longer. Once he has all seven, Edgar re-reads Prosper's essay and reproaches himself as a dunce for not

having hit on the colors sooner. It's all there in Vauglais's prose, he declares, plain as day. (He's being much too hard on himself. I've read the green book a dozen times and I have yet to find the passage where Prosper hints at the colors.)

How about a look at the most difficult designs? Gentlemen, if you please…

There's nothing there. I know—that's what I said, the first time I saw the fifth image. *"Le Silence,"* the Silence. Compared to the designs that precede it, this one is so faint as to be barely detectable. And when you shine a bright white light onto it, it practically disappears. There is something in there, though; you have to stare at it for a while. More so than with the previous images, what you see here varies dramatically from viewer to viewer.

Edgar never records his response to the Silence, which is a pity. Having cracked the secret of Vauglais's designs, he studies the essay more carefully, attempting to discern the use to which the images were to be put, the nature of Prosper's Great Work, his Transumption. (There's that word again. I never clarified its meaning vis-à-vis Vauglais's ideas, did I?) The following year, when Edgar sits down to write "The Masque of the Red Death," it is no small part as an answer to the question of what Prosper was up to. That answer shares features with some of the stories he had written prior to his 1840 revelation; although, interestingly, they came after he had obtained his copy of the green book.

From the looks on your faces, I'd say you've seen what the Silence contains. I don't suppose anyone wants to share?

I'll take that as a "No." It's all right: what you find there can be rather… disconcerting.

We're almost at the end of our little display. What do you say we proceed to number six? Here we go…

Violet's such a nice color, isn't it? You have to admit, some of those other colors are pretty intense. Not this one, though; even the image—*"L'Arbre,"* the Tree—looks more or less like a collection of lines trying to be a tree. Granted, if you study the design, you'll notice that each individual line seems to fade and then re-inscribe itself, but compared to the effect of the

previous image, this is fairly benign. Does it remind you of anything? Anything we were discussing, say, in the last hour or so?

Oh never mind, I'll just tell you. Remember those trees Vauglais saw outside the Abbey? Remember the way that, when he tried to focus on any of them, he saw a mass of black lines? Hmmm. Maybe there's more to this pleasant design than we'd thought. Maybe it's, not the key to all this, but the key trope, or figure.

I know: which means what, exactly? Let's return to Edgar's story. You have a group of people who are sequestered together, made to disguise their outer identities, encouraged to debauch themselves, to abandon their inner identities, all the while passing from one end of this color schema to the other. They put their selves aside, become a massive blank, a kind of psychic space. That opening allows what is otherwise an abstraction, a personification, to change states, to manifest itself physically. Of course, the Red Death doesn't appear of its own volition; it's called into being by Prince Prospero, who can't stop thinking about the reason he's retreated into his abbey.

This is what happened—what started to happen to the members of the *salon* Prosper took into the Parisian catacombs. He attempted to implement what he'd learned during his years at the Abbey, what he first had perceived through the snow twirling in front of his eyes in that Russian forest. To manipulate—to mold—to…

Suppose that the real—what we take to be the real—imagine that world outside the self, all this out here, is like a kind of writing. We write it together; we're continuously writing it together, onto the surface of things, the paper, as it were. It isn't something we do consciously, or that we exercise any conscious control over. We might glimpse it in moments of extremity, as Vauglais did, but that's about as close to it as most of us will come. What if, though, what if it were possible to do something more than simply look? What if you could clear a space on that paper and write something *else*? What might you bring into being?

Edgar tries to find out. Long after "The Masque," which is as much caution as it is field guide, he decides to apply Prosper's ideas for real. He does so during that famous lost week at the end of his life, that gap in the

biographical record that has prompted so much speculation. Since Virginia succumbed to tuberculosis some two years prior, Edgar's been on a long downward slide, a protracted effort at joining his beloved wife. You know, extensive forests have been harvested for the production of critical studies of Edgar's "bizarre" relationship with Virginia; rarely, if ever, does it occur to anyone that Edgar and Virginia might honestly have been in love, and that the difference in their ages might have been incidental. Yet what is that final couple of years but a man grieving himself to death? Yes, Edgar approaches other women about possible marriage, but why do you think none of those proposals work out?

Not only is Edgar actively chasing his death, paddling furiously toward it on a river of alcohol; little known to him, death has noticed his pursuit, and responded by planting a black seed deep within his brain, a gift that is blossoming into a tumor. Most biographers have remained ignorant of this disease, but years after his death, Edgar's body is exhumed—it doesn't matter why; given who Edgar was, of course this was going to happen to him. During the examination of his remains, it's noted that his brain is shrunken and hard. Anyone who knows about these things will tell you that the brain is one of the first organs to decay, which means that what those investigators found rattling around old Edgar's cranium would not have been petrified gray matter. Cancer, however, is a much more durable beast; long after it's killed you, a tumor hangs around to testify to its crime. Your guess is as good as mine when it comes to how long he'd had it, but by the time I'm talking about, Edgar is in a pretty bad way. He's having trouble controlling the movements of his body, his speech; half the time he seems drunk, he's stone cold sober.

There's something else. Increasingly, wherever he turns his gaze, whatever he looks at flickers, and instead of, say, an orange resting on a plate, he sees a jumble of black lines approximating a sphere on a circle. It takes him longer to recall Vauglais's experience in that Russian forest than you'd expect; the cancer, no doubt, devouring his memory. Sometimes the confusion of lines that's replaced the streetlamp in front of him is itself replaced by blankness, by an absence that registers as a dull white space in the middle of things. It's as if a painter took a palette knife and scraped the oils from a portion of his picture until all that remained was the canvas,

slightly stained. At first, Edgar thinks there's something wrong with his vision; when he understands what he's experiencing, he speculates that the blank might be the result of his eyes' inability to endure their own perception, that he might be undergoing some degree of what we would call hysterical blindness. As he continues to see that whiteness, though, he realizes that he isn't seeing less, but more. He's seeing through to the surface those black lines are written on.

In the days immediately prior to his disappearance, Edgar's perception undergoes one final change. For the slightest instant after that space has uncovered itself to him, something appears on it, a figure—a woman. Virginia, yes, as he saw her last, ravaged by tuberculosis, skeletally thin, dark hair in disarray, mouth and chin scarlet with the blood she'd hacked out of her lungs. She appears barefoot, wrapped in a shroud stained with dirt. Almost before he sees her, she's gone, her place taken by whatever he'd been looking at to begin with.

Is it any surprise that, presented with this dull white surface, Edgar should fill it with Virginia? Her death has polarized him; she's the lodestone that draws his thoughts irresistibly in her direction. With each glimpse of her he has, Edgar apprehends that he's standing at the threshold of what could be an extraordinary chance. Although he has discovered the secret of Prosper's designs, discerned the nature of the Great Work, never once has it occurred to him that he might put that knowledge to use. Maybe he hasn't really believed in it; maybe he suspects that, underneath it all, the effect of the various colors on Vauglais's designs is some type of clever optical illusion. Now, though, now that there's the possibility of gaining his beloved back—

Edgar spends that last week sequestered in a room in a boarding house a few streets up from that alley where he tripped over Prosper's book. He's arranged for his meals to be left outside his door; half the time, however, he leaves them untouched, and even when he takes the dishes into his room, he eats the bare minimum to sustain him. About midway through his stay, the landlady, a Mrs. Foster, catches sight of him as he withdraws into his room. His face is flushed, his skin slick with sweat, his clothes disheveled; he might be in the grip of a fever whose fingers are tightening around him with each degree it climbs. As his door closes, Mrs. Foster considers running up to it and demanding to speak to this man. The last thing she wants is for her

boarding house to be known as a den of sickness. She has taken two steps forward when she stops, turns, and bolts downstairs as if the Devil himself were tugging her apron strings. For the remainder of the time this lodger is in his room, she will send one of the serving girls to deliver his meals, no matter their protests. Once the room stands unoccupied, she will direct a pair of those same girls to remove its contents—including the cheap bed—carry them out back, and burn them until nothing remains but a heap of ashes. The empty room is closed, locked, and removed from use for the rest of her time running that house, some twenty-two years.

I know: what did she see? What could she have seen, with the door shut? Perhaps it wasn't what she saw; perhaps it was what she felt: the surface of things yielding, peeling away to what was beneath, beyond—the strain of a will struggling to score its vision onto that surface—the waver of the brick and mortar, of the very air around her, as it strained against this newness coming into being. How would the body respond to what could only register as a profound wrongness? Panic, you have to imagine, maybe accompanied by sudden nausea, a fear so intense as to guarantee a lifetime's aversion to anything associated with its cause.

Had she opened that door, though, what sight would have confronted her? What would we see?

Nothing much—at least, that's likely to have been our initial response. Edgar seated on the narrow bed, staring at the wall opposite him. Depending on which day it was, we would have noticed his shirt and pants looking more or less clean. Like Mrs. Foster, we would have remarked his flushed face, the sweat soaking his shirt; we would have heard his breathing, deep and hoarse. We might have caught his lips moving, might have guessed he was repeating Virginia's name over and over again, but been unable to say for sure. Were we to guess he was in a trance, caught in an opium dream, aside from the complete and total lack of opium-related paraphernalia, we could be forgiven.

If we were to remain in that room with him—if we could stand the same sensation that sent Mrs. Foster running—it wouldn't take us long to turn our eyes in the direction of Edgar's stare. His first day there, we wouldn't have noticed much if anything out of the ordinary. Maybe we would have wondered if the patch of bricks he was so focused on didn't look just the

slightest shade paler than its surroundings, before dismissing it as a trick of the light. Return two, three days later, and we would find that what we had attributed to mid-afternoon light blanching already-faded masonry is a phenomenon of an entirely different order. Those bricks are blinking in and out of sight. One moment, there's a worn red rectangle; the next, there isn't. What takes its place is difficult to say, because it's back almost as fast as it was gone; although, after its return, the brick looks a bit less solid… less certain, you might say. Ragged around the edges, though not in any way you could put words to. All over that stretch of wall, bricks are going and coming and going. It almost looks as if some kind of code is spelling itself out using the stuff of Edgar's wall as its pen and paper.

Were we to find ourselves in that same room, studying that same spot, a day later, we would be startled to discover a small area of the wall, four bricks up, four down, vanished. Where it was—let's call what's there—or what isn't there—white. To tell the truth, it's difficult to look at that spot—the eye glances away automatically, the way it does from a bright light. Should you try to force the issue, tears dilute your vision.

Return to Edgar's room over the next twenty-four hours, and you would find that gap exponentially larger—from four bricks by four bricks to sixteen by sixteen, then from sixteen by sixteen to—basically, the entire wall. Standing in the doorway, you would have to raise your hand, shield your eyes from the dull whiteness in front of you. Blink furiously, squint, and you might distinguish Edgar in his familiar position, staring straight into that blank. Strain your gaze through the narrowest opening your fingers can make, and for the half a second until your head jerks to the side, you see a figure, deep within the white. Later, at a safe remove from Edgar's room, you may attempt to reconstruct that form, make sense of your less-than-momentary vision. All you'll be able to retrieve, however, is a pair of impressions, the one of something coalescing, like smoke filling up a jar, the other of thinness, like a child's stick-drawing grown life-sized. For the next several months, not only your dreams, but your waking hours will be plagued by what you saw between your fingers. Working late at night, you will be overwhelmed by the sense that whatever you saw in that room is standing just outside the cone of light your lamp throws. Unable to help yourself, you'll reach for the shade, tilt it back, and find… nothing, your

bookcases. Yet the sensation won’t pass; although you can read the spines of the hardcovers ranked on your bookshelves, your skin won’t stop bristling at what you can’t see there.

What about Edgar, though? What image do his eyes find at the heart of that space? I suppose we should ask, What image of Virginia?

It—she changes. She’s thirteen, wearing the modest dress she married him in. She’s nine, wide-eyed as she listens to him reciting his poetry to her mother and her. She’s dead, wrapped in a white shroud. So much concentration is required to pierce through to the undersurface in the first place—and then there’s the matter of maintaining the aperture—that it’s difficult to find, let alone summon, the energy necessary to focus on a single image of Virginia. So the figure in front of him brushes a lock of dark hair out of her eyes, then giggles in a child’s high-pitched tones, then coughs and sprays scarlet blood over her lips and chin. Her mouth is pursed in thought; she turns to a knock on the front door; she thrashes in the heat of the disease that is consuming her. The more time that passes, the more Edgar struggles to keep his memories of his late wife separate from one another. She’s nine, standing beside her mother, wound in her burial cloth. She’s in her coffin, laughing merrily. She’s saying she takes him as her lawful husband, her mouth smeared with blood.

Edgar can’t help himself—he’s written, and read, too many stories about exactly this kind of situation for him not to be aware of all the ways it could go hideously wrong. Of course, the moment such a possibility occurs to him, it’s manifest in front of him. You know how it is: the harder you try to keep a pink elephant out of your thoughts, the more that animal cavorts center-stage. Virginia is obscured by white linen smeared with mud; where her mouth is, the shroud is red. Virginia is naked, her skin drawn to her skeleton, her hair loose and floating around her head as if she’s under water. Virginia is wearing the dress she was buried in, the garment and the pale flesh beneath it opened by rats. Her eyes—or the sockets that used to cradle them—are full of her death, of all she has seen as she was dragged out of the light down into the dark.

With each new monstrous image of his wife, Edgar strives not to panic. He bends what is left of his will toward summoning Virginia as she was at sixteen, when they held a second, public wedding. For an instant, she’s

there, holding out her hand to him with that simple grace she's displayed as long as he's known her—and then she's gone, replaced by a figure whose black eyes have seen the silent halls of the dead, whose ruined mouth has tasted delicacies unknown this side of the grave. This image does not flicker; it does not yield to other, happier pictures. Instead, it grows more solid, more definite. It takes a step toward Edgar, who is frantic, his heart thudding in his chest, his mouth dry. He's trying to stop the process, trying to close the door he's spent so much time and effort prying open, to erase what he's written on that blankness. The figure takes another step forward, and already is at the edge of the opening. His attempts at stopping it are useless—what he's started has accrued sufficient momentum for it to continue regardless of him. His lips are still repeating, "Virginia."

When the—we might as well say, when Virginia places one gray foot onto the floor of Edgar's room, a kind of ripple runs through the entire room, as if every last bit of it is registering the intrusion. How Edgar wishes he could look away as she crosses the floor to him. In a far corner of his brain that is capable of such judgments, he knows that this is the price for his *hubris*—really, it's almost depressingly formulaic. He could almost accept the irony if he did not have to watch those hands dragging their nails back and forth over one another, leaving the skin hanging in pale strips; if he could avoid the sight of whatever is seething in the folds of the bosom of her dress; if he could shut his eyes to that mouth and its dark contents as they descend to his. But he can't; he cannot turn away from his Proserpine as she rejoins him at last.

Four days prior to his death, Edgar is found on the street, delirious, barely conscious. He never recovers. Right at the end, he rallies long enough to dictate a highly abbreviated version of the story I've told you to a Methodist minister, who finds what he records so disturbing he sews it into the binding of the family Bible, where it will remain concealed for a century and a half.

As for what Edgar called forth—she walks out of our narrative and is not seen again.

It's a crazy story. It makes the events of Vauglais's life seem almost reasonable in comparison. If you were so inclined, I suppose you could ascribe Edgar's experience in that rented room to an extreme form of auto-hypnosis which, combined with the stress on his body from his drinking and

the brain tumor, precipitates a fatal collapse. In which case, the story I've told you is little more than an elaborate symptom. It's the kind of reading a literary critic prefers; it keep the more… outré elements safely quarantined within the writer's psyche.

Suppose, though, suppose. Suppose that all this insanity I've been feeding you isn't a quaint example of early-nineteenth-century pseudoscience. Suppose that its interest extends well beyond any insights it might offer in interpreting "The Masque of the Red Death." Suppose—let's say the catastrophe that overtakes Edgar is the result of—we could call it poor planning. Had he paid closer attention to the details of Prosper's history, especially to that sojourn in the catacombs, he would have recognized the difficulty—to the point of impossibility—of making his attempt alone. Granted, he was desperate. But there was a reason Vauglais took the members of his *salon* underground with him—to use as a source of power, a battery, as it were. They provided the energy; he directed it. Edgar's story is a testament to what must have been a tremendous—an almost unearthly will. In the end, though, it wasn't enough.

Of course, how could he have brought together a sufficient number of individuals, and where? By the close of his life, he wasn't the most popular of fellows. Not to mention, he would have needed to expose the members of this hypothetical group to Prosper's designs and their corresponding colors.

Speaking of which: pleasant as this violet has been, what do you say we proceed to the *pièce de résistance*? Faceless lackeys, on my mark—

Ahh. I don't usually talk about these things, but you have no idea how much trouble this final color combination gave me. I mean, red and black gives you dark red, right? Right, except that for the design to achieve its full effect, putting up a dark red light won't do. You need red layered over black—and a true black light, not ultraviolet. The result, though—I'm sure you'll agree, it was worth sweating over. It's like a picture painted in red on a black canvas, wouldn't you say? And look what it does for the final image. It seems to be reaching right out of the screen for you, doesn't it? Strictly speaking, Vauglais's name for it, *"Le Dessous,"* the Underneath, isn't quite grammatical French, but we needn't worry ourselves over such details. There are times I think another name would be more appropriate: the Maw, perhaps, and then there are moments I find the Underneath perfect. You can

see why I might lean toward calling it a mouth—the Cave would do, as well—except that the perspective's all wrong. If this is a mouth, or a cave, we aren't looking into it; we're already inside, looking out.

Back to Edgar. As we've said, even had he succeeded in gathering a group to assist him in his pursuit, he would have had to find a way to introduce them Prosper's images and their colors. If he could have, he would have… reoriented them, their minds, the channels of their thoughts. Vauglais's designs would have brought them closer to where they needed to be; they would have made available certain dormant faculties within his associates.

Even that would have left him with challenges, to be sure. Mesmerism, hypnosis, as Prosper himself discovered, is a delicate affair, one subject to such external variables as running out of lamp oil too soon. It would have been better if he could have employed some type of pharmacological agent, something that would have deposited them into a more useful state, something sufficiently concentrated to be delivered via a few bites of an innocuous food—a cookie, say, whose sweetness would mask any unpleasant taste, and which he could cajole his assistants to sample by claiming that his wife had baked them.

Then, if Edgar had been able to keep this group distracted while the cookies did their work—perhaps by talking to them about his writing—about the genesis of one of his stories, say, "The Masque of the Red Death"—if he had managed this far, he might have been in a position to make something happen, to perform the Great Work.

There's just one more thing, and that's the object for which Edgar would have put himself to all this supposed trouble: Virginia. I like to think I'm as romantic as the next guy, but honestly—you have the opportunity to rescript reality, and the best you can come up with is returning your dead wife to you? Talk about a failure to grasp the possibilities…

What's strange—and frustrating—is that it's all right there in "The Masque," in Edgar's own words. The whole idea of the Great Work, of Transumption, is to draw one of the powers that our constant, collective writing of the real consigns to abstraction across the barrier into physicality. Ideally, one of the members of that trinity Edgar named so well, Darkness and Decay and the Red Death, those who hold illimitable dominion over all.

The goal is to accomplish something momentous, to shake the world to its foundations, not play out some hackneyed romantic fantasy. That was what Vauglais was up to, trying to draw into form the force that strips the flesh from our bones, that crumbles those bones to dust.

No matter. Edgar's mistake still has its uses as a distraction, and a lesson. Not that it'll do any of you much good. By now, I suspect few of you can hear what I'm saying, let alone understand it. I'd like to tell you the name of what I stirred into that cookie dough, but it's rather lengthy and wouldn't do you much good, anyway. I'd also like to tell you it won't leave you permanently impaired, but that wouldn't exactly be true. One of the consequences of its efficacy, I fear. If it's any consolation, I doubt most of you will survive what's about to follow. By my reckoning, the power I'm about to bring into our midst will require a good deal of… sustenance in order to establish a more permanent foothold here. I suspect this is of even less consolation, but I do regret this aspect of the plan I'm enacting. It's just —once you come into possession of such knowledge, how can you not make use—full use of it?

You see, I'm starting at the top. Or at the beginning—before the beginning, really, before light burst across the perfect formlessness that was everything. I'm starting with Darkness, with something that was already so old at that moment of creation that it had long forgotten its identity. I plan to restore it. I will give myself to it for a guide, let it envelop me and consume you and run out from here in a flood that will wash this world away. I will give to Darkness a dominion more complete than it has known since it was split asunder.

Look—in the air—can you see it?

The Wide, Carnivorous Sky

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John Langan

The Collected Short Fiction

1

9:13 P.M.

From the other side of the campfire, Lee said, “So it’s a vampire.”

“I did not say vampire,” Davis said. “Did you hear me say vampire?”

It was exactly the kind of thing Lee would say, the gross generalization that obscured more than it clarified. Not for the first time since they’d set out up the mountain, Davis wondered at their decision to include Lee in their plans.

Lee held up his right hand, index finger extended. “It has the fangs.”

“A mouthful of them.”

Lee raised his middle finger. “It turns into a bat.”

“No—its wings are like a bat’s.”

“Does it walk around with them?”

“They—it extrudes them from its arms and sides.”

“‘Extrudes’?” Lee said.

Han chimed in: “College.”

Not this shit again, Davis thought. He rolled his eyes to the sky, dark blue studded by early stars. Although the sun’s last light had drained from the air, his stomach clenched. He dropped his gaze to the fire.

The Lieutenant spoke. “He means the thing extends them out of its body.”

“Oh,” Lee said. “Sounds like it turns into a bat to me.”

“Uh-huh,” Han said.

“Whatever,” Davis said. “It doesn’t—”

Lee extended his ring finger and spoke over him. “It sleeps in a coffin.”

“Not a coffin—”

“I know, a flying coffin.”

“It isn’t—it’s in low-Earth orbit, like a satellite.”

“What was it you said it looked like?” the Lieutenant asked. “A cocoon?”

“A chrysalis,” Davis said.

“Same thing,” the Lieutenant said.

“More or less,” Davis said, unwilling to insist on the distinction because, even a year and three-quarters removed from Iraq, the Lieutenant was still the Lieutenant and you did not argue the small shit with him.

“Coffin, cocoon, chrysalis,” Lee said, “it has to be in it before sunset or it’s in trouble.”

“Wait,” Han said. “Sunset.”

“Yes,” Davis began.

“The principle’s the same,” the Lieutenant said. “There’s a place it has to be and a time it has to be there by.”

“Thank you, sir,” Lee said. He raised his pinky. “And, it drinks blood.”

“Yeah,” Davis said, “it does.”

“Lots,” Han said.

“Yeah,” the Lieutenant said.

For a moment, the only sounds were the fire popping and, somewhere out in the woods, an owl prolonging its question. Davis thought of Fallujah.

“Okay,” Lee said, “how do we kill it?”

2

2004

There had been rumors, stories, legends of the things you might see in combat. Talk to any of the older guys, the ones who’d done tours in Vietnam, and you heard about a jungle in which you might meet the ghosts

of Chinese invaders from five centuries before; or serve beside a grunt whose heart had been shot out a week earlier but who wouldn't die; or find yourself stalked by what you thought was a tiger but had a tail like a snake and a woman's voice. The guys who'd been part of the first war in Iraq —"The good one," a sailor Davis knew called it—told their own tales about the desert, about coming across a raised tomb, its black stone worn free of markings, and listening to someone laughing inside it all the time it took you to walk around it; about the dark shapes you might see stalking through a sandstorm, their arms and legs a child's stick-figures; about the sergeant who swore his reflection had been killed so that, when he looked in a mirror now, a corpse stared back at him. Even the soldiers who'd returned from Afghanistan talked about vast forms they'd seen hunched at the crests of mountains; the street in Kabul that usually ended in a blank wall, except when it didn't; the pale shapes you might glimpse darting into the mouth of the cave you were about to search. A lot of what you heard was bullshit, of course, the plot of a familiar movie or TV show adapted to new location and cast of characters, and a lot of it started off sounding as if it were headed somewhere interesting then ran out of gas halfway through. But there were some stories about which, even if he couldn't quite credit their having happened, some quality in the teller's voice, or phrasing, caused him to suspend judgment.

During the course of his associate's degree, Davis had taken a number of courses in psychology—preparation for a possible career as a psychologist —and in one of these, he had learned that, after several hours of uninterrupted combat (he couldn't remember how many, had never been any good with numbers), you would hallucinate. You couldn't help it; it was your brain's response to continuous unbearable stress. He supposed that at least some of the stories he'd listened to in barracks and bars might owe themselves to such cause, although he was unwilling to categorize them all as symptoms. This was not due to any overriding belief in either organized religion or disorganized superstition; it derived more from principle—specifically, a conclusion that an open mind was the best way to meet what continually impressed him as an enormous world packed full of many things.

By Fallujah, Davis had had no experiences of the strange, the bizarre, no stories to compare with those he'd accumulated over the course of basic and his deployment. He hadn't been thinking about that much as they took up their positions south of the city; all his available attention had been directed at the coming engagement. Davis had walked patrol, had felt the crawl of the skin at the back of your neck as you made your way down streets crowded with men and women who'd been happy enough to see Saddam pulled down from his pedestal but had long since lost their patience with those who'd operated the crane. He'd ridden in convoys, his head light, his heart throbbing at the base of his throat as they passed potential danger after potential danger—a metal can on the right shoulder, what might be a shell on the left—and while they'd done their best to reinforce their Hummers with whatever junk they could scavenge, Davis was acutely aware that it wasn't enough, a consequence of galloping across the Kuwaiti desert with The Army You Had. Davis had stood checkpoint, his mouth dry as he sighted his M-16 on an approaching car that appeared full of women in black burkas who weren't responding to the signs to slow down, and he'd wondered if they were suicide bombers, or just afraid, and how much closer he could allow them before squeezing the trigger. However much danger he'd imagined himself in, inevitably, he'd arrived after the sniper had opened fire and fled, or passed the exact spot an IED would erupt two hours later, or been on the verge of aiming for the car's engine when it screeched to a halt. It wasn't that Davis hadn't discharged his weapon; he'd served support for several nighttime raids on suspected insurgent strongholds, and he'd sent his own bullets in pursuit of the tracers that scored the darkness. But support wasn't the same thing as kicking in doors, trying to kill the guy down the hall who was trying to kill you. It was not the same as being part of the Anvil.

That was how the Lieutenant had described their role. "Our friends in the United States Marine Corps are going to play the Hammer," he had said the day before. "They will sweep into Fallujah from east and west and they will drive what hostiles they do not kill outright south, where we will be waiting to act as the Anvil. The poet Goethe said that you must be either hammer or anvil. We will be both, and we are going to crush the hostiles between us."

After the Lieutenant's presentation, Han had said, "Great—so the jarheads have all the fun," with what Davis judged a passable imitation of regret, a false sentiment fairly widely held. Davis had been sure, however, the certainty a ball of lead weighting his gut, that this time was going to be different. Part of it was that the Lieutenant had known one of the contractors who'd been killed, incinerated, and strung up at the Saddam Bridge last April. Davis wasn't clear exactly how the men had been acquainted, or how well, but the Lieutenant had made no secret of his displeasure at not being part of the first effort to (re)take the city in the weeks following the men's deaths. He had been—you couldn't say happy, exactly, at the failure of that campaign—but he was eager for what was shaping up to be a larger-scale operation. Though seven months gone, the deaths and dishonorings of his acquaintances had left the Lieutenant an appetite for this mission. Enough to cause him to disobey his orders and charge into Fallujah's southern section? Davis didn't think so, but there was a reason the man still held the rank of Lieutenant when his classmates and colleagues were well into their captaincies.

The other reason for Davis's conviction that, this time, something was on its way to him was a simple matter of odds. It wasn't possible—it was not possible that you could rack up this much good luck and not have a shitload of the bad bearing down on you like a SCUD on an anthill. A former altar boy, he was surprised at the variety of prayers he remembered—not just the Our Father and the Hail Mary, but the Apostles' Creed, the Memorare, and the Hail, Holy Queen. As he disembarked the Bradley and ran for the shelter of a desert-colored house, the sky an enormous, pale blue dome above him, Davis mumbled his way through his prayers with a fervency that would have pleased his mother and father no end. But even as his lips shaped the words, he had the strong sense that this was out of God's hands, under the control of one of those medieval demigoddesses, Dame Fortune or something.

Later, recovering first in Germany, then at Walter Reed, Davis had thought that walking patrol, riding convoy, standing checkpoint, he must have been saved from something truly awful each and every time, for the balance to be this steep.

3

10:01 P.M.

"I take it stakes are out," the Lieutenant said.

"Sir," Lee said, "I unloaded half a clip easy into that sonovabitch, and I was as close to him as I am to you."

"Closer," Han said.

"The point is, he took a half-step backwards—maybe—before he tore my weapon out of my hands and fractured my skull with it."

"That's what I'm saying," the Lieutenant said. "I figure it has to be… what? Did you get your hands on some kind of major ordnance, Davis? An rpg? A Stinger? I'll love you like a son—hell, I'll adopt you as my own if you tell me you have a case of Stingers concealed under a bush somewhere. Those'll give the fucker a welcome he won't soon forget."

"Fucking-A," Han said.

"Nah," Lee said. "A crate of Willy Pete oughta just about do it. Serve his ass crispy-fried!"

Davis shook his head. "No Stingers and no white phosphorous. Fire isn't going to do us any good."

"How come?" Lee said.

"Yeah," Han said.

"If I'm right about this thing spending its nights in low-Earth orbit—in its 'coffin'—and then leaving that refuge to descend into the atmosphere so it can hunt, its skin has to be able to withstand considerable extremes of temperature."

"Like the Space Shuttle," the Lieutenant said. "Huh. For all intents and purposes, it's fireproof."

"Oh," Lee said.

"Given that it spends some of its time in the upper atmosphere, as well as actual outer space, I'm guessing substantial cold wouldn't have much effect, either."

“We can’t shoot it, can’t burn it, can’t freeze it,” Lee said. “Tell me why we’re here, again?” He waved at the trees fringing the clearing. “Aside from the scenery, of course.”

“Pipe down,” the Lieutenant said.

“When we shot at it,” Davis said, “I’m betting half our fire missed it.” He held up his hand to the beginning of Lee’s protest. “That’s no reflection on anyone. The thing was fast, cheetah-taking-down-a-gazelle fast. Not to mention, it’s so goddamned *thin*… Anyway, of the shots that connected with it, most of them were flesh wounds.” He raised his hand to Lee, again. “Those who connected with it,” a nod to Lee, “were so close their fire passed clean through it.”

“Which is what I was saying,” Lee said.

“There’s a lot of crazy shit floating around space,” Davis said—“little particles of sand, rock, ice, metal. Some of them get to moving pretty fast. If you’re doing repairs to the Space Station and one of those things hits you, it could ruin your whole day. Anything that’s going to survive up there is going to have to be able to deal with something that can punch a hole right through you.”

“It’s got a self-sealing mechanism,” the Lieutenant said. “When Lee fired into it, its body treated the bullets as so many dust-particles.”

“And closed right up,” Davis said. “Like some kind of super-clotting-factor. Maybe that’s what it uses the blood for.”

“You’re saying it’s bulletproof, too?” Lee said.

“Shit,” Han said.

“Not—more like, bullet-resistant.”

“Think of it as a mutant healing ability,” the Lieutenant said, “like Wolverine.”

“Oh,” Han said.

“Those claws it has,” Lee said, “I guess Wolverine isn’t too far off the mark.”

“No,” Han said. “Sabertooth.”

“What?” Lee said. “The fuck’re you going on about?”

“Sabertooth’s claws.” Han held up his right hand, fingers splayed. He curled his fingers into a fist. “Wolverine’s claws.”

“Man has a point,” the Lieutenant said.

“Whatever,” Lee said.

“Here’s the thing,” Davis said: “it’s bullet-resistant, but it can still feel pain. Think about how it reacted when Lee shot it. It didn’t tear his throat open: it took the instrument that had hurt it and used that to hurt Lee. You see what I’m saying?”

“Kind of,” Lee said.

“Think about what drove it off,” Davis said. “Remember?”

“Of course,” the Lieutenant said. He nodded at Han. “It was Han sticking his bayonet in the thing’s side.”

For which it crushed his skull, Davis could not stop himself from thinking. He added his nod to the Lieutenant’s. “Yes he did.”

“How is that different from shooting it?” Lee said.

“Your bullets went in one side and out the other,” Davis said. “Han’s bayonet stuck there. The thing’s healing ability could deal with an in-and-out wound no problem; something like this, though: I think it panicked.”

“Panicked?” Lee said. “It didn’t look like it was panicking to me.”

“Then why did it take off right away?” Davis said.

“It was full; it heard more backup on the way; it had an appointment in fucking Samara. How the fuck should I know?”

“What’s your theory?” the Lieutenant said.

“The type of injury Han gave it would be very bad if you’re in a vacuum. Something opening you up like that and leaving you exposed…”

“You could vent some or even all of the blood you worked so hard to collect,” the Lieutenant said. “You’d want to get out of a situation like that with all due haste.”

“Even if your healing factor could seal the wound’s perimeter,” Davis said, “there’s still this piece of steel in you that has to come out and, when it does, will reopen the injury.”

“Costing you still more blood,” the Lieutenant said.

“Most of the time,” Davis said, “I mean, like, nine hundred and ninety-nine thousand, nine hundred and ninety-nine times out of a million, the thing would identify any such threats long before they came that close. You saw its ears, its eyes.”

“Black on black,” Lee said. “Or, no—black over black, like the corneas had some kind of heavy tint and what was underneath was all pupil.”

“Han got lucky,” Davis said. “The space we were in really wasn’t that big. There was a lot of movement, a lot of noise—”

“Not to mention,” Lee said, “all the shooting and screaming.”

“The right set of circumstances,” the Lieutenant said.

“Saved our asses,” Lee said, reaching over to pound Han’s shoulder. Han ducked to the side, grinning his hideous smile.

“If I can cut to the chase,” the Lieutenant said. “You’re saying we need to find a way to open up this fucker and keep him open so that we can wreak merry havoc on his insides.”

Davis nodded. “To cut to the chase, yes, exactly.”

“How do you propose we do this?”

“With these.” Davis reached into the duffel bag to his left and withdrew what appeared to be a three-foot piece of white wood, tapered to a point sharp enough to prick your eye looking at it. He passed the first one to the Lieutenant, brought out one for Lee and one for Han.

“A baseball bat?” Lee said, gripping near the point and swinging his like a Louisville Slugger. “We gonna club it to death?”

Neither Davis nor the Lieutenant replied; they were busy watching Han, who’d located the grips at the other end of his and was jabbing it, first underhand, then overhand.

“The people you meet working at Home Depot,” Davis said. “They’re made out of an industrial resin, inch-for-inch, stronger than steel. Each one has a high-explosive core.”

“Whoa,” Lee said, setting his on the ground with exaggerated care.

“The detonators are linked to this,” Davis said, fishing a cell phone from his shirt pocket. “Turn it on.” Pointing to the Lieutenant, Han, Lee, and himself, he counted, “One-two-three-four. Send. That’s it.”

“I was mistaken,” the Lieutenant said. “It appears we will be using stakes, after all.”

4

2004

At Landstuhl, briefly, and then at Walter Reed, at length, an impressive array of doctors, nurses, chaplains, and other soldiers whose job it was encouraged Davis to discuss Fallujah. He was reasonably sure that, while under the influence of one of the meds that kept his body at a safe distance, he had let slip some detail, maybe more. How else to account for the change in his nurse’s demeanor? Likely, she judged he was a psych case, a diagnosis he was half inclined to accept. Even when the Lieutenant forced his way into Davis’s room, banging around in the wheelchair he claimed he could use well enough, goddamnit, Davis was reluctant to speak of anything except the conditions of the other survivors. Of whom he had been shocked—truly shocked, profoundly shocked, almost more so than by what had torn through them—to learn there were only two, Lee and Han, Manfred bled out on the way to be evac’d, everyone else long gone by the time the reinforcements had stormed into the courtyard. According to the Lieutenant, Han was clinging to life by a thread so fine you couldn’t see it. He’d lost his helmet in the fracas, and the bones in his skull had been crushed like an eggshell. Davis, who had witnessed that crushing, nodded. Lee had suffered his own head trauma, although, compared to Han’s, it wasn’t anything a steel plate couldn’t fix. The real problem with Lee was that, if he wasn’t flooded with some heavy-duty happy pills, he went fetal, thumb in his mouth, the works.

“What about you?” the Lieutenant said, indicating the armature of casts, wires, weights, and counterweights that kept Davis suspended like some overly ambitious kid’s science project.

“Believe it or not, sir,” Davis said, “it really is worse than it looks. My pack and my helmet absorbed most of the impact. Still left me with a broken

back, scapula, and ribs—but my spinal cord's basically intact. Not that it doesn't hurt like a motherfucker, sir. Yourself?"

"The taxpayers of the United States of America have seen fit to gift me with a new right leg, since I so carelessly misplaced the original." He knocked on his pajama leg, which gave a hollow, plastic sound.

"Sir, I am so sorry—"

"Shut it," the Lieutenant said. "It's a paper cut." Using his left foot, he rolled himself back to the door, which he eased almost shut. Through the gap, he surveyed the hallway outside long enough for Davis to start counting, *One Mississippi, Two Mississippi,* then wheeled himself to Davis's head. He leaned close and said, "Davis."

"Sir?"

"Let's leave out the rank thing for five minutes, okay? Can we do that?"

"Sir—yes, yes we can."

"Because ever since the docs have reduced my drugs to the point I could string one sentence after another, I've been having these memories—dreams—I don't know what the fuck to call them. Nightmares. And I can't decide if I'm losing it, or if this is why Lee needs a palmful of M&Ms to leave his bed. So I need you to talk to me straight, no bullshit, no telling the officer what you think he wants to hear. I would genuinely fucking appreciate it if we could do that."

Davis looked away when he saw the Lieutenant's eyes shimmering. Keeping his own focused on the ceiling, he said, "It came out of the sky. That's where it went, after Han stuck it, so I figure it must have dropped out of there, too. It explains why, one minute we're across the courtyard from a bunch of hostiles, the next, that thing's standing between us."

"Did you see it take off?"

"I did. After it had stepped on Han's head, it spread its arms—it kind of staggered back from Han, caught itself, then opened its arms and these huge wings snapped open. They were like a bat's, skin stretched over bone—they appeared so fast I'm not sure, but they shot out of its body. It tilted its head, jumped up, high, ten feet easy, flapped the wings, which raised it another

ten feet, and turned—the way a swimmer turns in the water, you know? Another flap, two, and it was gone."

"Huh."

Davis glanced at the Lieutenant, whose face was smooth, his eyes gazing across some interior distance. He said, "Do you—"

"Back up," the Lieutenant said. "The ten of us are in the courtyard. How big's the place?"

"I'm not very good with—"

"At a guess."

"Twenty-five feet wide, maybe fifty long. With all those jars in the way—what were they?"

"Planters."

"Three-foot-tall stone planters?"

"For trees. They were full of dirt. Haven't you ever seen those little decorative trees inside office buildings?"

"Oh. All right. What I was going to say was: With the row of planters at either end, the place might have been larger."

"Noted. How tall were the walls?"

"Taller than any of us—eight feet, easy. They were thick, too, a foot and a half, two feet. It really was a good spot to attack from. Open fire from the walls, then drop behind them when they can't maintain that position. The tall buildings are behind it, and we don't hold any of them, so they don't have to worry about anyone firing down on them. I'm guessing they figured we didn't know where we were well enough to call in any artillery on them. No, if we want them, we have to run a hundred feet of open space to a doorway that's an easy trap. They've got the planters for cover near and far, not to mention the doorway in the opposite wall as an exit."

"Agreed."

"To be honest, now that we're talking about it, I can't imagine how we made it into the place without losing anyone. By all rights, they should have tagged a couple of us crossing from our position to theirs. And that doorway: they should have massacred us."

“We were lucky. When we returned fire, they must have panicked. Could be they didn’t see all of us behind the wall, thought they were ambushing three or four targets, instead of ten. Charging them may have given the impression there were even more of us. It took them until they were across the courtyard to get a grip and regroup.”

“By which time we were at the doorway.”

“So it was Lee all the way on the left—”

“With Han beside him.”

“Right, and Bay and Remsnyder. Then you and Petit—”

“No—it was me and Lugo, then Petit, then you.”

“Yes, yes. Manfred was to my right, and Weymouth was all the way on the other end.”

“I’m not sure how many—”

“Six. There may have been a seventh in the opposite doorway, but he wasn’t around very long. Either he went down, or he decided to season his valor with a little discretion.”

“It was loud—everybody firing in a confined space. I had powder all over me from their shots hitting the wall behind us. I want to say we traded bullets for about five minutes, but it was what? Half that?”

“Less. A minute.”

“And…”

“Our guest arrived.”

“At first—at first it was like, I couldn’t figure out what I was seeing. I’m trying to line up the guy who’s directly across from me—all I need is for him to stick up his head again—and all of a sudden, there’s a shadow in the way. That was my first thought: *It’s a shadow.* Only, who’s casting it? And why is it hanging in the air like that? And why is it fucking eight feet tall?”

“None of us understood what was in front of us. I thought it was a woman in a burka, someone I’d missed when we’d entered the courtyard. As you say, though, you don’t meet a lot of eight-foot-tall women, in or out of Iraq.”

“Next thing… no, that isn’t what happened.”

“What?”

“I was going to say the thing—the Shadow—was in among the hostiles, which is true, it went for them first, but before it did, there was a moment…”

“You saw something—something else.”

“Yeah,” Davis said. “This pain shot straight through my head. We’re talking instant migraine, so intense I practically puked. That wasn’t all: this chill… I was freezing, colder than I’ve ever been, like you read about in Polar expeditions. I couldn’t—the courtyard—”

“What?”

“The courtyard wasn’t—I was somewhere high, like, a hundred miles high, so far up I could see the curve of the Earth below me. Clouds, continents, the ocean: what you see in the pictures they take from orbit. Stars, space, all around me. Directly overhead, a little farther away than you are from me, there was this thing. I don’t know what the fuck it was. Big—long, maybe long as a house. It bulged in the middle, tapered at the ends. The surface was dark, shiny—does that make any sense? The thing was covered in—it looked like some kind of lacquer. Maybe it was made out of the lacquer.

“Anyway, one moment my head’s about to crack open, my teeth are chattering, my skin’s blue, and I’m in outer space. The next, all of that’s gone, I’m back in the courtyard, and the Shadow—the thing is ripping the hostiles to shreds.”

“And then,” the Lieutenant said, “it was our turn.”

5

November 11, 2004, 11:13 A.M.

In the six hundred twenty-five days since that afternoon in the hospital, how many times had Davis recited the order of events in the courtyard, whether with the Lieutenant, or with Lee once his meds had been stabilized, or with Han once he’d regained the ability to speak (though not especially well)? At some point a couple of months on, he’d realized he’d been keeping count—*That’s the thirty-eighth time; that’s the forty-third*—and then, a couple of months after that, he’d realized that he’d lost track. The

narrative of their encounter with what Davis continued to think of as the Shadow had become daily catechism, to be reviewed morning, noon, and night, and whenever else he happened to think of it.

None of them had even tried to run, which there were times Davis judged a sign of courage, and times he deemed an index of their collective shock at the speed and ferocity of the thing's assault on the insurgents. Heads, arms, legs were separated from bodies as if by a pair of razored blades, and wherever a wound opened red, there was the thing's splintered maw, drinking the blood like a kid stooping to a water fountain. The smells of blood, piss, and shit mixed with those of gunpowder and hot metal. While Davis knew they had been the next course on the Shadow's menu, he found it difficult not to wonder how the situation might have played out had Lee —followed immediately by Lugo and Weymouth—not opened up on the thing. Of course, the instant that narrow head with its spotlight eyes, its scarlet mouth, turned in their direction, everyone else's guns erupted, and the scene concluded the way it had to. But if Lee had been able to restrain himself…

Lugo was first to die. In a single leap, the Shadow closed the distance between them and drove one of its sharpened hands into his throat, venting his carotid over Davis, whom it caught with its other hand and flung into one of the side walls with such force his spine and ribs lit up like the Fourth of July. As he was dropping onto his back, turtling on his pack, the thing was raising its head from Lugo's neck, spearing Petit through his armor and hauling him toward it. Remsnyder ran at it from behind; the thing's hand lashed out and struck his head from his shoulders. It was done with Petit in time to catch Remsnyder's body on the fall and jam its mouth onto the bubbling neck. It had shoved Petit's body against the Lieutenant, whose feet tangled with Petit's and sent the pair of them down. This put him out of the way of Manfred and Weymouth, who screamed for everyone to get clear and fired full automatic. Impossible as it seemed, they missed, and for their troubles the Shadow lopped Manfred's right arm off at the elbow and opened Weymouth like a Christmas present. From the ground, the Lieutenant shot at it; the thing sliced through his weapon and the leg underneath it. Now Bay, Han, and Lee tried full auto, which brought the thing to Bay, whose face it bit off. It swatted Han to the ground, but Lee

somehow ducked the swipe it aimed at him and tagged it at close range. The Shadow threw Bay's body across the courtyard, yanked Lee's rifle from his hands, and swung it against his head like a ballplayer aiming for the stands. He crumpled, the thing reaching out for him, and Han leapt up, his bayonet ridiculously small in his hand. He drove it into the thing's side—what would be the floating ribs on a man—to the hilt. The Shadow, whose only sound thus far had been its feeding, opened its jaws and shrieked, a high scream more like the cry of a bat, or a hawk, than anything human. It caught Han with an elbow to the temple that tumbled him to the dirt, set its foot on his head, and pressed down. Han's scream competed with the sound of his skull cracking in multiple spots. Davis was certain the thing meant to grind Han's head to paste, but it staggered off him, one claw reaching for the weapon buried in its skin. Blood so dark it was purple was oozing around the hilt. The Shadow spread its arms, its wings cracked open, and it was gone, fled into the blue sky that Davis would spend the next quarter-hour staring at, as the Lieutenant called for help and tried to tourniquet first his leg then Manfred's arm.

Davis had stared at the sky before—who has not?—but, helpless on his back, his spine a length of molten steel, his ears full of Manfred whimpering that he was gonna die, oh sweet Jesus, he was gonna fucking die, the Lieutenant talking over him, insisting no he wasn't, he was gonna be fine, it was just a little paper cut, the washed blue bowl overhead seemed less sheltering canopy and more endless depth, a gullet over which he had the sickening sensation of dangling. As Manfred's cries diminished and the Lieutenant told—ordered him to stay with him, Davis flailed his arms at the ground to either side of him in an effort to grip onto an anchor, something that would keep him from hurtling into that blue abyss.

The weeks and months to come would bring the inevitable nightmares, the majority of them the Shadow's attack replayed at half-, full-, or double-speed, with a gruesome fate for himself edited in. Sometimes repeating the events on his own or with a combination of the others led to a less disturbed sleep; sometimes it did not. There was one dream, though, that no amount of discussion could help, and that was the one in which Davis was plummeting through the sky, lost in an appetite that would never be sated.

6

12:26 A.M.

Once he was done setting the next log on the fire, Davis leaned back and said, “I figure it’s some kind of stun effect.”

“How so?” Lee said.

“The thing lands in between two groups of heavily armed men: it has to do something to even the odds. It hits us with a psychic blast, shorts out our brains so that we’re easier prey.”

“Didn’t seem to do much to Lee,” the Lieutenant said.

“No brain!” Han shouted.

“Ha-fucking-ha,” Lee said.

“Maybe there were too many of us,” Davis said. “Maybe it miscalculated. Maybe Lee’s a mutant and this is his special gift. Had the thing zigged instead of zagged, gone for us instead of the insurgents, I don’t think any of us would be sitting here, regardless of our super powers.”

“Speak for yourself,” Lee said.

“For a theory,” the Lieutenant said, “it’s not bad. But there’s a sizable hole in it. You”—he pointed at Davis—“saw the thing’s coffin or whatever. Lee”—a nod to him—“was privy to a bat’s-eye view of the thing’s approach to one of its hunts in—did we ever decide if it was Laos or Cambodia?”

“No, sir,” Lee said. “It looked an awful lot like some of the scenery from the first *Tomb Raider* movie, which I’m pretty sure was filmed in Cambodia, but I’m not positive.”

“You didn’t see Angelina Jolie running around?” Davis said.

“If only,” Lee said.

“So with Lee, we’re in Southeast Asia,” the Lieutenant said, “with or without the lovely Ms. Jolie. From what Han’s been able to tell me, he was standing on the moon or someplace very similar to it. I don’t believe he could see the Earth from where he was, but I’m not enough of an astronomer to know what that means.

“As for myself, I had a confused glimpse of the thing tearing its way through the interior of an airplane—what I’m reasonably certain was a B-17, probably during the Second World War.

“You see what I mean? None of us witnessed the same scene—none of us witnessed the same time, which you would imagine we would have if we’d been subject to a deliberate attack. You would expect the thing to hit us all with the same image. It’s more efficient.”

“Maybe that isn’t how this works,” Davis said. “Suppose what it does is more like a cluster bomb, a host of memories it packs around a psychic charge? If each of us thinks he’s someplace different from everybody else, doesn’t that maximize confusion, create optimal conditions for an attack?”

The Lieutenant frowned. Lee said, “What’s your theory, sir?”

“I don’t have one,” the Lieutenant said. “Regardless of its intent, the thing got in our heads.”

“And stayed there,” Lee said.

“Stuck,” Han said, tapping his right temple.

“Yes,” the Lieutenant said. “Whatever their precise function, our exposure to the thing’s memories appears to have established a link between us and it.”

Davis said, “Which is what’s going to bring it right here.”

7

2004-2005

When Davis was on board the plane to Germany, he could permit himself to hope that he was, however temporarily, out of immediate danger of death—not from the injury to his back, which, though painful in the extreme, he had known from the start would not claim his life, but from the reappearance of the Shadow. Until their backup arrived in a hurry of bootsteps and rattle of armor, he had been waiting for the sky to vomit the figure it had swallowed minutes (moments?) prior, for his blood to leap into the thing’s jagged mouth. The mature course of action had seemed to prepare for his imminent end, which he had attempted, only to find the effort beyond him. Whenever word of some acquaintance’s failure to return

from the latest patrol had prompted Davis to picture his final seconds, he had envisioned his face growing calm, even peaceful, his lips shaping the syllables of a heartfelt Act of Contrition. However, between the channel of fire that had replaced his spine and the vertiginous sensation that he might plunge into the sky—not to mention, the Lieutenant's continuing monologue to Manfred, the pungence of gunpowder mixed with the bloody reek of meat, the low moans coming from Han—Davis was unable to concentrate. Rather than any gesture of reconciliation toward the God with Whom he had not been concerned since his discovery of what lay beneath his prom date's panties junior year, Davis's attention had been snarled in the sound of the Shadow's claws puncturing Lugo's neck, the fountain of Weymouth's blood over its arm and chest, the wet slap of his entrails hitting the ground, the stretch of the thing's mouth as it released its scream. Despite his back, which had drawn his vocal chords taut, once the reinforcements had arrived and a red-faced medic peppered him with questions while performing a quick assessment of him, Davis had strained to warn them of their danger. But all his insistence that they had to watch the sky had brought him was a sedative that pulled him into a vague, gray place.

Nor had his time at the Battalion Aid Station, then some larger facility (Camp Victory? with whatever they gave him, most of the details a variety of medical staff poured into his ears sluiced right back out again) caused him to feel any more secure. As the gray place loosened its hold on him and he stared up at the canvas roof of the BAS, Davis had wanted to demand what the fuck everyone was thinking. Didn't they know the Shadow could slice through this material as if it were cling film? Didn't they understand it was waiting to descend on them right now, this very fucking minute? It would rip them to shreds; it would drink their fucking *blood.* At the presence of a corpsman beside him, he'd realized he was shouting—or as close to shouting as his voice could manage—but he'd been unable to restrain himself, which had led to calming banalities and more vague grayness. He had returned to something like consciousness inside a larger space in the CSH, where the sight of the nearest wall trembling from the wind had drawn his stomach tight and sped a fresh round of protests from his mouth. When he struggled up out of the shot that outburst occasioned, Davis had found himself in a dim cavern whose curving sides rang with the

din of enormous engines. His momentary impression that he was dead and this some unexpected, bare-bones afterlife was replaced by the recognition that he was on a transport out of Iraq—who knew to where? It didn't matter. A flood of tears had rolled from his eyes as the dread coiling his guts had, if not fled, at least calmed.

At Landstuhl, in a solidly built hospital with drab but sturdy walls and a firm ceiling, Davis was calmer. (As long as he did not dwell on the way the Shadow's claws had split Petit's armor, sliced the Lieutenant's rifle in two.) That, and the surgeries required to relieve the pressure on his spine, left him, to quote a song he'd never liked that much, comfortably numb.

Not until he was back in America, though, reclining in the late medieval luxury of Walter Reed, the width of an ocean and a continent separating him from Fallujah, did Davis feel anything like a sense of security. Even after his first round of conversations with the Lieutenant had offered him the dubious reassurance that, if he were delusional, he was in good company, a cold comfort made chillier still by Lee, his meds approaching the proper levels, corroborating their narrative, Davis found it less difficult than he would have anticipated to persuade himself that Remsnyder's head leaping from his body on a jet of blood was seven thousand miles away. And while his pulse still quickened whenever his vision strayed to the rectangle of sky framed by the room's lone window, he could almost pretend that this was a different sky. After all, hadn't that been the subtext of all the stories he'd heard from other vets about earlier wars? Weird shit happened, yes—sometimes, very bad weird shit happened—but it took place over there, In Country, in another place where things didn't work the same way they did in the good old U.S. of A. If you could keep that in mind, Davis judged, front-and-center in your consciousness, you might be able to live with the impossible.

Everything went—you couldn't call it swimmingly—it went, anyway, until Davis began his rehabilitation, which consisted of: a) learning how to walk again and b) strength training for his newly (re)educated legs. Of course, he had been in pain after the initial injury—though shock and fear had kept the hurt from overwhelming him—and his nerves had flared throughout his hospital stay—especially following his surgery—though a pharmacopeia had damped those sensations down to smoldering. Rehab was different.

Rehab was a long, low-ceilinged room that smelled of sweat and industrial antiseptic, at one end of which grazed a small herd of the kind of exercise machines you saw faded celebrities hawking on late-night TV, the center of which held a trio of parallel bars set too low, and the near end of which was home to a series of overlapping blue mats whose extensive cracks suggested an aerial view of a river basin. Rehab was slow stretches on the mats, then gripping onto the parallel bars while you tried to coax your right leg into moving forward; once you could lurch along the bars and back, rehab was time on one of the exercise machines, flat on your back, your legs bent, your feet pressed against a pair of pedals connected to a series of weights you raised by extending your legs. Rehab was about confronting pain, inviting it in, asking it to sit down and have a beer so the two of you could talk for a while. Rehab was not leaning on the heavy-duty opiates and their synthetic friends; it was remaining content with the over-the-counter options and ice-packs. It was the promise of a walk outside—an enticement that made Davis's palms sweat and his mouth go dry.

When the surgeon had told Davis the operation had been a success and that there appeared to be no permanent damage to his spinal cord, Davis had imagined himself, freed of his cast and its coterie of pulleys and counterweights, sitting up on his own and strolling out the front door. Actually, he'd been running in his fantasy. The reality, he quickly discovered, was that merely raising himself to a sitting position was an enterprise far more involved than he ever had appreciated, as was a range of action so automatic it existed below his being able to admit he'd never given it much thought. He supposed the therapists here were as good as you were going to find, but that didn't make the routines they subjected him to —he subjected himself to—any easier or less painful.

It was during one of these sessions, his back feeling as if it had been scraped raw and the exposed tissue generously salted, that Davis had his first inkling that Fallujah was not a self-contained narrative, a short, grisly tale; rather, it was the opening chapter of a novel, one of those eight-hundred-page Stephen King specials. Lucy, Davis's primary therapist, had him on what he had christened the Rack. His target was twenty leg presses; in a fit of bravado, he had promised her thirty. No doubt, Davis had known instances of greater pain, but those had been spikes on the graph. Though

set at a lower level, this hurt was constant, and while Lucy had assured him that he would become used to it, so far he hadn't. The pain glared like the sun flaring off a window; it flooded his mind white, made focusing on anything else impossible. That Lucy was encouraging him, he knew from the tone of her voice, but he could not distinguish individual words. Already, his vision was blurred from the sweat streaming out of him, so when the blur fractured, became a kaleidoscope-jumble of color and geometry, he thought little of it and raised his fingers to clear his eyes.

According to Lucy, Davis removed his hand from his face, paused, then fell off the machine on his right side, trembling and jerking. For what she called his seizure's duration, which she clocked at three minutes fifteen seconds, Davis uttered no sound except for a gulping noise that made his therapist fear he was about to swallow his tongue.

To the Lieutenant, then to Lee and eventually Han, Davis would compare what he saw when the rehab room went far away to a wide-screen movie, one of those panoramic deals that was supposed to impart the sensation of flying over the Rockies, or holding on for dear life as a roller coaster whipped up and down its course. A surplus of detail crowded his vision. He was in the middle of a sandy street bordered by short buildings whose walls appeared to consist of sheets of long, dried grass framed with slender sticks. A dozen, two dozen women and children dressed in pastel robes and turbans ran frantically from one side of the street to the other as men wearing dark brown shirts and pants aimed Kalashnikovs at them. Some of the men were riding brown and white horses; some were stalking the street; some were emerging from alleys between the buildings, several of whose walls were releasing thick smoke. Davis estimated ten men. The sounds—it was as if the soundtrack to this film had been set to record the slightest vibration of air, which it played back at twice the normal level. Screams raked his eardrums. Sandals scraped the ground. Guns cracked; bullets thudded into skin. Horses whickered. Fire snapped. An immense thirst, worse than any he had known, possessed him. His throat was not dry; it was arid, as if it—as if he were composed of dust from which the last eyedropper of moisture had long been squeezed.

One of the men—not the nearest, who was walking the opposite direction from Davis's position, but the next closest, whose horse had shied from the

flames sprouting from a grass wall and so turned its rider in Davis's direction—caught sight of Davis, his face contracting in confusion at what he saw. The man, who might have been in his early twenties, started to raise his rifle, and everything sped up, the movie fast-forwarded. There was—his vision wavered, and the man's gun dipped, his eyes widening. Davis was next to him—he had half scaled the horse and speared the hollow of the man's throat with his right hand, whose fingers, he saw, were twice as long as they had been, tapered to a set of blades. He felt the man's tissue part, the ends of his fingers (talons?) scrape bone. Blood washed over his palm, his wrist, and the sensation jolted him. His talons flicked to the left, and the man's head tipped back like a tree falling away from its base. Blood misted the air, and before he realized what was happening, his mouth was clamped to the wound, full of hot, copper liquid. The taste was rain falling in the desert; in three mighty gulps, he had emptied the corpse and was springing over its fellows, into the midst of the brightly-robed women and children.

The immediate result of Davis's three-minute hallucination was the suspension of his physical therapy and an MRI of his brain. Asked by Lucy what he recalled of the experience, Davis had shaken his head and answered, "Nothing." It was the same response he gave to the new doctor who stopped into his room a week later and, without identifying himself as a psychiatrist, told Davis he was interested in the nightmares that had brought him screaming out of sleep six of the last seven nights. This was a rather substantial change in his nightly routine; taken together with his recent seizure, it seemed like cause for concern. Perhaps Davis could relate what he remembered of his nightmares?

How to tell this doctor that closing his eyes—an act he resisted for as long as could each night—brought him to that yellow-brown street; the lime, saffron, and orange cloth stretching as mothers hauled their children behind them; the dull muzzles of the Kalashnikovs coughing fire? How to describe the sensations that still lived in his skin, his muscles: the tearing of skin for his too-long fingers; the bounce of a heart in his hand the instant before he tore it from its setting; the eggshell crunch of bone between his jaws? Most of all, how to convey to this doctor, this shrink who was either an unskilled actor or not trying very hard, the concentrate of pleasure that was the rush of blood into his mouth, down his throat, the satisfaction of his terrific thirst

so momentary it made the thirst that much worse? Although Davis had repeated his earlier disavowal and maintained it in the face of the doctor's extended—and, to be fair, sympathetic—questions until the man left, a week's worth of poor sleep made the wisdom of his decision appear less a foregone conclusion. What he had seen—what he had been part of the other week was too similar to the vision he'd had in the courtyard not to be related; the question was, how? Were Davis to summarize his personal horror ride to the psychiatrist—he would have to tell him about Fallujah first, of course—might the doctor have more success at understanding the connections between his driver's-seat views of the Shadow's activities?

Sure, Davis thought, *right after he's had you fitted for your straitjacket.* The ironic thing was, how often had he argued the benefits of the Army's psychiatric care with Lugo? It had been their running gag. Lugo would return from reading his e-mail with news of some guy stateside who'd lost it, shot his wife, himself, which would prompt Davis to say that it was a shame the guy hadn't gotten help before it came to that. Help, Lugo would say, from whom? The Army? Man, you must be joking. The Army don't want nothing to do with no grunt can't keep his shit together. No, no, Davis would say, sure, they still had a ways to go, but the Army was changing. The kinds of combat-induced pathologies it used to pretend didn't exist were much more likely to be treated early and effectively. (If Lee and Han were present, and/or Remsnyder, they'd ooh and aah over Davis's vocabulary.) Oh yeah, Lugo would reply, if they don't discharge your ass right outta here, they'll stick you at some bullshit post where you won't hurt anyone. No, no, Davis would say, that was a rumor. Oh yeah, Lugo would say, like the rumor about the guys who went to the doctor for help with their PTSD and were told they were suffering from a fucking pre-existing condition, so it wasn't the Army's problem? No, no, Davis would say, that was a few bad guys. Oh yeah, Lugo would say.

Before he and the Lieutenant—who had been abducted by a platoon of siblings, their spouses, and their kids for ten days in Florida—discussed the matter, Davis passed his nightly struggles to stay awake wondering if the psychiatric ward was the worst place he might wind up. His only images of such places came from films like *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest, Awakenings,* and *K-PAX,* but based on those examples, he could expect to

spend his days robed and slippered, possibly medicated, free to read what he wanted except during individual and group therapy sessions. If it wasn't quite the career as a psychologist he'd envisioned, he'd at least be in some kind of proximity to the mental health field. Sure, it would be a scam, but didn't the taxpayers of the U.S. of A. owe him recompense for shipping him to a place where the Shadow could just drop in and shred his life? The windows would be barred or meshed, the doors reinforced—you could almost fool yourself such a location would be safe.

However, with his second episode, it became clear that safe was one of those words that had been bayoneted, its meaning spilled on the floor. Davis had been approved to resume therapy with Lucy, who had been honestly happy to see him again. It was late in the day; what with the complete breakdown in his sleeping patterns, he wasn't in optimal condition for another go-around on the Rack, but after so much time stuck in his head, terrified at what was in there with him, the prospect of a vigorous workout was something he was actually looking forward to. As before, gentle stretching preceded the main event, which Lucy told Davis he didn't have to do but for which he had cavalierly assured her he was, if not completely able, at least ready and willing. With the second push of his feet against the pedals, pain ignited up his back, and his lack of sleep did not aid in his tolerating it. Each subsequent retraction and extension of his legs ratcheted the hurt up one more degree, until he was lying on a bed of fire.

This time

8

2:15 A.M.

"my vision didn't blur—it cracked, as if my knees levering up and down were an image on a TV screen and something smacked the glass. Everything spiderwebbed and fell away. What replaced it was movement—I was moving up, my arms beating down; there was this feeling that they were bigger, much bigger, that when I swept them down, they were gathering the air and piling it beneath them. I looked below me, and there were bodies—parts of bodies, organs—all over the place. There was less blood than there should have been. Seeing them scattered across the ground

—it was like having a bird's-eye view of some kind of bizarre design. Most of them were men, twenties and thirties; although there were two women and a couple-three kids. Almost everybody was wearing jeans and workboots, sweatshirts, baseball caps, except for a pair of guys dressed in khaki and I'm pretty sure cowboy hats."

"What the fuck?" Lee said.

"Cowboys," Han said.

"Texas Border Patrol," the Lieutenant said.

"So those other people were like, illegal immigrants?" Lee said.

The Lieutenant nodded.

Davis said, "I've never been to Texas, but the spot looked like what you see on TV. Sandy, full of rocks, some scrub brush, and short trees. There was a muddy stream—you might call it a river, I guess, if that was what you were used to—in the near distance, and a group of hills further off. The sun was perched on top of the hills, setting, and that red ball made me beat my arms again and again, shrinking the scene below, raising me higher into the sky. There was—I felt full—more than full, gorged, but thirsty, still thirsty, that same, overpowering dryness I'd experienced the previous… time. The thirst was so strong, so compelling, I was a little surprised when I kept climbing. My flight was connected to the sun balanced on that hill, a kind of—not panic, exactly: it was more like urgency. I was moving, now. The air was thinning; my arms stretched even larger to scoop enough of it to keep me moving. The temperature had dropped—was dropping, plunging down. Something happened—my mouth was already closed, but it was as if it sealed somehow. Same thing with my nostrils; I mean, they closed themselves off. My eyes misted, then cleared. I pumped my arms harder than I had before. This time, I didn't lose speed; I kept moving forward.

"Ahead, I saw the thing I'd seen in the courtyard—a huge shape, big as a house. Pointed at the ends, fat in the middle. Dark—maybe dark purple, maybe not—and shiny. The moment it came into view, this surge of… I don't know what to call it. Honestly, I want to say it was a cross between the way you feel when you put your bag down on your old bed and, 'Mommy,' that little kid feeling, except that neither of those is completely right. My arms were condensing, growing substantial. I was heading toward

the middle. As I drew closer, its surface rippled, like water moving out from where a stone strikes it. At the center of the ripple, a kind of pucker opened into the thing. That was my destination."

"And?" Lee said.

"Lucy emptied her Gatorade on me and brought me out of it."

"You have got to be fucking kidding me," Lee said.

"Afraid not," Davis said.

"How long was this one?" the Lieutenant asked.

"Almost five minutes."

"It took her that long to toss her Gatorade on you?" Lee said.

"There was some kind of commotion at the same time, a couple of guys got into a fight. She tried to find help; when she couldn't, she doused me."

Lee shook his head.

"And you have since confirmed the existence of this object," the Lieutenant said.

"Yes, sir," Davis said. "It took some doing. The thing's damned near impossible to see, and while no one would come out and say so to me, I'm pretty sure it doesn't show up on radar, either. The couple of pictures we got were more dumb luck than anything."

"'We'?" Lee said.

"I…"

The Lieutenant said, "I put Mr. Davis in touch with a friend of mine in Intelligence."

"Oh," Lee said. "Wait—shit: you mean the CIA's involved?"

"Relax," Davis said.

"Because I swear to God," Lee said, "those stupid motherfuckers would fuck up getting toast out of the toaster and blame us for their burned fingers."

"It's under control," the Lieutenant said. "This is our party. No one else has been invited."

“Doesn’t mean they won’t show up,” Lee said. “Stupid assholes with their fucking sunglasses and their ‘We’re so scary.’ Oooh.” He turned his head and spat.

Davis stole a look at the sky. Stars were winking out and in as something passed in front of them. His heart jumped, his hand was on his stake before he identified the shape as some kind of bird. The Lieutenant had noticed his movement; his hand over his stake; he said, “Everything all right, Davis?”

“Fine,” Davis said. “Bird.”

“What?” Lee said.

“Bird,” Han said.

“Oh,” Lee said. “So. I have a question.”

“Go ahead,” the Lieutenant said.

“The whole daylight thing,” Lee said, “the having to be back in its coffin before sunset—what’s up with that?”

“It does seem… atypical, doesn’t it?” the Lieutenant said. “Vampires are traditionally creatures of the night.”

“Actually, sir,” Lee said, “that’s not exactly true. The original Dracula—you know, in the book—he could go out in daylight; he just lost his powers.”

“Lee,” the Lieutenant said, “you are a font of information. Is this what our monster is trying to avoid?”

“I don’t know,” Lee said. “Could be.”

“I don’t think so,” Davis said. “It’s not as if daylight makes its teeth any sharper.”

“Then what is it?” Lee said.

“Beats me,” Davis said. “Don’t we need daylight to make Vitamin D? Maybe it’s the same, uses the sun to manufacture some kind of vital substance.”

“Not bad,” the Lieutenant said.

“For something you pulled out of your ass,” Lee said.

“Hey—you asked,” Davis said.

“Perhaps it’s time for some review,” the Lieutenant said. “Can we agree on that? Good.

“We have this thing—this vampire,” holding up a hand to Davis, “that spends its nights in an orbiting coffin. At dawn or thereabouts, it departs said refuge in search of blood, which it apparently obtains from a single source.”

“Us,” Han said.

“Us,” the Lieutenant said. “It glides down into the atmosphere on the lookout for likely victims—of likely groups of victims, since it prefers to feed on large numbers of people at the same time. Possibly, it burns through its food quickly.”

“It’s always thirsty,” Davis said. “No matter how much it drinks, it’s never enough.”

“Yeah,” Lee said, “I felt it, too.”

“So did we all,” the Lieutenant said. “It looks to satisfy its thirst at locations where its actions will draw little to no attention. These include remote areas such as the U.S.-Mexico border, the Sahara and Gobi, and the Andes. It also likes conflict zones, whether Iraq, Darfur, or the Congo. How it locates these sites is unknown. We estimate that it visits between four and seven of them per day. That we have been able to determine, there does not appear to be an underlying pattern to its selection of either target areas or individuals within those areas. The vampire’s exact level of intelligence is another unknown. It possesses considerable abilities as a predator, not least of them its speed, reaction time, and strength. Nor should we forget its teeth and”—a rap of the artificial leg—“claws.”

“Not to mention that mind thing,” Lee said.

“Yes,” the Lieutenant said. “Whether by accident or design, the vampire’s appearance is accompanied by a telepathic jolt that momentarily disorients its intended victims, rendering them easier prey. For those who survive the meeting”—a nod at them—“a link remains that may be activated by persistent, pronounced stress, whether physical or mental. The result of this activation is a period of clairvoyance, during which the lucky individual rides along for the vampire’s current activities. Whether the vampire usually

has equal access to our perceptions during this time is unclear; our combined accounts suggest it does not.

"However, there are exceptions."

9

2005

"I know how we can kill it," Davis said. "At least, I think I do—how we can get it to come to a place where we can kill it."

Lee put his Big Mac on his tray and looked out the restaurant window. The Lieutenant paused in the act of dipping his fries into a tub of barbecue sauce. Han continued chewing his McNugget but nodded twice.

"The other day—two days ago, Wednesday—I got to it."

"What do you mean?" the Lieutenant said.

"It was coming in for a landing, and I made it mess up."

"Bullshit," Lee said. He did not shift his gaze from the window. His face was flushed.

"How?" the Lieutenant said.

"I was having a bad day, worse than the usual bad day. Things at Home Depot—the manager's okay, but the assistant manager's a raging asshole. Anyway, I decided a workout might help. I'd bought these Kung Fu DVDs —"

"Kung Fu," the Lieutenant said.

Davis shrugged. "Seemed more interesting than running a treadmill."

Through a mouthful of McNugget, Han said, "Bruce Lee."

"Yeah," Davis said. "I put the first disc on. To start with, everything's fine. I'm taking it easy, staying well below the danger level. My back's starting to ache, the way it always does, but that's okay, I can live with it. As long as I keep the situation in low gear, I can continue with my tiger style."

"Did it help?" the Lieutenant asked.

"My worse-than-bad day? Not really. But it was something to do, you know?"

The Lieutenant nodded. Lee stared at the traffic edging up the road in front of the McDonald's. Han bit another McNugget.

"This time, there was no warning. My back's feeling like someone's stitching it with a hot needle, then I'm dropping out of heavy cloud cover. Below, a squat hill pushes up from dense jungle. A group of men are sitting around the top of the hill. They're wearing fatigues, carrying Kalashnikovs. I think I'm somewhere in South America: maybe these guys are FARQ; maybe they're some of Chavez's boys.

"I've been through the drill enough to know what's on the way: a ringside seat for blood and carnage. It's reached the point, when one of these incidents overtakes me, I don't freak out. The emotion that grips me is dread, sickness at what's coming. But this happens so fast, there isn't time for any of that. Instead, anger—the anger that usually shows up a couple of hours later, when I'm still trying to get the taste of blood out of my mouth, still trying to convince myself that I'm not the one who's so thirsty—for once, that anger arrives on time and loaded for bear. It's like the fire that's crackling on my back finds its way into my veins and ignites me.

"What's funny is, the anger makes my connection to the thing even more intense. The wind is pressing my face, rushing over my arms—my wings—I'm aware of currents in the air, places where it's thicker, thinner, and I twitch my nerves to adjust for it. There's one guy standing off from the rest, closer to the treeline, though not so much I—the thing won't be able to take him. I can practically see the route to him, a steep dive with a sharp turn at the very end that'll let the thing knife through him. He's sporting a bush hat, which he's pushed back on his head. His shirt's open, T-shirt dark with sweat. He's holding his weapon self-consciously, trying to looking like a badass, and it's this, more than the smoothness of his skin, the couple of whiskers on his chin, that makes it clear he isn't even eighteen. It—I—we jackknife into the dive, and thirsty, Christ, thirsty isn't the word: this is dryness that reaches right through to your fucking soul. I've never understood what makes the thing tick—what *drives* it—so well.

"At the same time, the anger's still there. The closer we draw to the kid, the hotter it burns. We've reached the bottom of the dive and pulled up; we're streaking over the underbrush. The kid's completely oblivious to the fact that his bloody dismemberment is fifty feet away and closing fast. I'm so

close to the thing, I can feel the way its fangs push against one another as they jut from its mouth. We're on top of the kid; the thing's preparing to retract its wings, slice him open, and drive its face into him. The kid is dead; he's dead and he just doesn't know it, yet.

"Only, it's like—I'm like—I don't even think, *No,* or *Stop,* or *Pull up.* It's more… I push; I shove against the thing I'm inside and its arms move. Its fucking arms jerk up as if someone's passed a current through them. Someone has—I have. I'm the current. The motion throws off the thing's strike, sends it wide. It flails at the kid as it flies past him, but he's out of reach. I can sense—the thing's completely confused. There's a clump of bushes straight ahead—*wham.*"

The Lieutenant had adopted his best you'd-better-not-be-bullshitting-me stare. He said, "I take it that severed the connection."

Davis shook his head. "No, sir. You would expect that—it's what would have happened in the past—but this time, it was like, I was so close to the thing, it was going to take something more to shake me loose."

"And?" the Lieutenant said.

Lee shoved his tray back, toppling his super-sized Dr. Pepper, whose lid popped off, splashing a wave of soda and ice cubes across the table. While Davis and the Lieutenant grabbed napkins, Lee stood and said, "What the fuck, Davis?"

"What?" Davis said.

"I said, What the fuck, asshole," Lee said. Several diners at nearby tables turned their heads toward him.

"Inside voices," the Lieutenant said. "Sit down."

"I don't think so," Lee said. "I don't have to listen to this shit." With that, he stalked away from the table, through the men and women swiftly returning their attentions to the meals in front of them, and out the side door.

"What the fuck?" Davis said, dropping his wad of soggy napkins on Lee's tray.

"That seems to be the question of the moment," the Lieutenant said.

"Sir—"

“Our friend and fellow is not having the best of months,” the Lieutenant said. “In fact, he is not having the best of years. You remember the snafus with his disability checks.”

“I thought that was taken care of.”

“It was, but it was accompanied by the departure of Lee’s wife and their two-year-old. Compared to what he was, Lee is vastly improved. In terms of the nuances of his emotional health, however, he has miles to go. The shit with his disability did not help; nor did spending all day home with a toddler who didn’t recognize his father.”

“He didn’t—”

“No, but I gather it was a close thing. A generous percentage of the wedding flatware paid the price for Lee’s inability to manage himself. In short order, the situation became too much for Shari, who called her father to come for her and Douglas.”

“Bitch,” Han said.

“Since then,” the Lieutenant said, “Lee’s situation has not improved. A visit to the local bar for a night of drinking alone ended with him in the drunk tank. Shari’s been talking separation, possibly divorce, and while Lee tends to be a bit paranoid about the matter, there may be someone else involved, an old boyfriend. Those members of Lee’s family who’ve visited him, called him, he has rebuffed in a fairly direct way. To top it all off, he’s been subject to the same intermittent feast of blood as the rest of us.”

“Oh,” Davis said. “I had no—Lee doesn’t talk to me—”

“Never mind. Finish your story.”

“It’s not a story.”

“Sorry. Poor choice of words. Go on, please.”

“All right,” Davis said. “Okay. You have to understand, I was as surprised by all this as—well, as anyone. I couldn’t believe I’d affected the thing. If it hadn’t been so real, so like all the other times, I would have thought I was hallucinating, on some kind of wish-fulfillment trip. As it was, there I was as the thing picked itself up from the jungle floor. The anger—my anger—I guess it was still there, but… on hold.

“The second the thing was upright, someone shouted and the air was hot with bullets. Most of them shredded leaves, chipped bark, but a few of them tagged the thing’s arm, its shoulder. Something was wrong: mixing in with its confusion, there was another emotion, something down the block from fear. I wasn’t doing anything: I was still stunned by what I’d made happen. The thing jumped, and someone—maybe a couple of guys—tracked it, headed it off, hit it in I can’t tell you how many places—it felt as if the thing had been punched a dozen times at once. It spun off course, slapped a tree, and went down, snapping branches on its way.

“Now it was pissed. Even before it picked itself up, the place it landed was being subject to intensive defoliation. A shot tore its ear. Its anger—if what I felt was fire, this was lava, thicker, slower-moving, hotter. It retreated, scuttled half a dozen trees deeper into the jungle. Whoever those guys were, they were professionals. They advanced on the spot where the thing fell and, when they saw it wasn’t there anymore, they didn’t rush in after it. Instead, they fell back to a defensive posture while one of them put in a call—for air support, I’m guessing.

“The thing was angry and hurt and the thirst—” Davis shook his head. He sipped his Coke. “What came next—I’m not sure I can describe it. There was this surge in my head—not the thing’s head, this was my brain I’m talking about—and the thing was looking out of my eyes.”

“It turned the tables on you,” the Lieutenant said.

“Not exactly,” Davis said. “I continued watching the soldiers maybe seventy-five feet in front of me, but I was… aware of the thing staring at the DVD still playing on the TV. It was as if the scene was on a screen just out of view.” He shook his head. “I’m not describing it right.

“Anyway, that was when the connection broke.”

Davis watched the Lieutenant evade an immediate response by taking a generous bite of his Double Quarter-Pounder with Cheese and chewing it with great care. Han swallowed and said, “Soldiers.”

“What?”

“Soldiers,” Han said.

Through his mouthful of burger, the Lieutenant said, “He wants to know what happened to the soldiers. Right?”

Han nodded.

“Beats the shit out of me,” Davis said. “Maybe their air support showed up and bombed the fucker to hell. Maybe they evac’d out of there.”

“But that isn’t what you think,” the Lieutenant said. “You think it got them.”

“Yes, sir,” Davis said. “The minute it was free of me, I think it had those poor bastards for lunch.”

“It seems a bit much to hope otherwise, doesn’t it?”

“Yes, sir, it does.”

When the Lieutenant opted for another bite of his sandwich, Davis said, “Well?”

The Lieutenant answered by lifting his eyebrows. Han switched from McNuggets to fries.

“As I see it,” Davis began. He stopped, paused, started again. “We know that the thing fucked with us in Fallujah, linked up with us. So far, this situation has only worked to our disadvantage: whenever one of us is in sufficient discomfort, the connection activates and dumps us behind the thing’s eyes for somewhere in the vicinity of three to five minutes. With all due respect to Lee, this has not been beneficial to anyone’s mental health.

“But what if—suppose we could duplicate what happened to me? Not just once, but over and over—even if only for ten or fifteen seconds at a time—interfere with whatever it’s doing, seriously fuck with it.”

“Then what?” the Lieutenant said. “We’re a thorn in its side. So?”

“Sir,” Davis said, “those soldiers hit it. Okay, yes, their fire wasn’t any more effective than ours was, but I’m willing to bet their percentages were significantly higher. That’s what me being on board in an—enhanced way did to the thing. We wouldn’t be a thorn—we’d be the goddamned bayonet Han jammed in its ribs.

“Not that we should wait for someone else to take it down. I’m proposing something more ambitious.”

“All right.”

“If we can disrupt the thing’s routine—especially if we cut into its feeding—it won’t take very long for it to want to find us. Assuming the second part of my experience—the thing has a look through our eyes—if that happens again, we can arrange it so that we let it know where we’re going to be. We pick a location with a clearing where the thing can land and surrounding tree cover where we can wait to ambush it. Before any of us goes to ruin the thing’s day, he puts pictures, maps, satellite photos of the spot on display, so that when the thing’s staring out of his eyes, that’s what it sees. If the same images keep showing up in front of it, it should get the point.”

The Lieutenant took the rest of his meal to reply. Han offered no comment. When the Lieutenant had settled into his chair after tilting his tray into the garbage and stacking it on top of the can, he said, “I don’t know, Davis. There are an awful lot more ifs than I prefer to hear in a plan. *If* we can access the thing the same way you did; *if* that wasn’t a fluke. *If* the thing does the reverse-vision stuff; *if* it understands what we’re showing it. *If* we can find a way to kill it.” He shook his head.

“Granted,” Davis said, “there’s a lot we’d have to figure out, not least how to put it down and keep it down. I have some ideas about that, but nothing developed. It would be nice if we could control our connection to the thing, too. I’m wondering if what activates the jump is some chemical our bodies are releasing when they’re under stress—maybe adrenaline. If we had access to a supply of adrenaline, we could experiment with doses—”

“You’re really serious about this.”

“What’s the alternative?” Davis said. “Lee isn’t the only one whose life is fucked, is he? How many more operations are you scheduled for, Han? Four? Five?”

“Four,” Han said.

“And how’re things in the meantime?”

Han did not answer.

“What about you, sir?” Davis said. “Oh sure, your wife and kids stuck around, but how do they act after you’ve had one of your fits, or spells, or whatever the fuck you call them? Do they rush right up to give Daddy a

hug, or do they keep away from you, in case you might do something even worse? Weren't you coaching your son's soccer team? How's that working out for you? I bet it's a lot of fun every time the ref makes a lousy call."

"Enough, Davis."

"It isn't as if I'm in any better shape. I have to make sure I remember to swallow a couple of tranquilizers before I go to work so I don't collapse in the middle of trying to help some customer load his fertilizer into his car. Okay, Rochelle had dumped me while I was away, but let me tell you how the dating scene is for a vet who's prone to seizures should things get a little too exciting. As for returning to college, earning my BS—maybe if I could have stopped worrying about how goddamned exposed I was walking from building to building, I could've focused on some of what the professors were saying and not fucking had to withdraw.

"This isn't the magic bullet," Davis said. "It isn't going to make all the bad things go away. It's… it is what it fucking is."

"All right," the Lieutenant said. "I'm listening. Han—you listening?"

"Listening," Han said.

10

4:11 A.M.

"So where do you think it came from?" Lee said.

"What do you mean?" Davis said. "We know where it comes from."

"No," Lee said, "I mean, before."

"Its secret origin," the Lieutenant said.

"Yeah," Lee said.

"How should I know?" Davis said.

"You're the man with the plan," Lee said. "Mr. Idea."

The Lieutenant said, "I take it you have a theory, Lee."

Lee glanced at the heap of coals that had been the fire. "Nah, not really."

"That sounds like a yes to me," the Lieutenant said.

"Yeah," Han said.

“Come on,” Davis said. “What do you think?”

“Well,” Lee said, then broke off, laughing. “No, no.”

“Talk!” Davis said.

“You tell us your theory,” the Lieutenant said, “I’ll tell you mine.”

“Okay, okay,” Lee said, laughing. “All right. The way I see it, this vampire is, like, the advance for an invasion. It flies around in its pod, looking for suitable planets, and when it finds one it parks itself above the surface, calls its buddies, and waits for them to arrive.”

“Not bad,” the Lieutenant said.

“Hang on,” Davis said. “What does it do for blood while it’s Boldly Going Where No Vampire Has Gone Before?”

“I don’t know,” Lee said. “Maybe it has some stored in its coffin.”

“That’s an awful lot of blood,” Davis said.

“Even in MRE form,” the Lieutenant said.

“Maybe it has something in the coffin that makes blood for it.”

“Then why would it leave to go hunting?” Davis said.

“It’s in suspended animation,” Lee said. “That’s it. It doesn’t wake up till it’s arrived at a habitable planet.”

“How does it know it’s located one?” Davis said.

“Obviously,” the Lieutenant said, “the coffin’s equipped with some sophisticated tech.”

“Thank you, sir,” Lee said.

“Not at all,” the Lieutenant said.

“I don’t know,” Davis said.

“What do you know?” Lee said.

“I told you—”

“Be real,” Lee said. “You’re telling me you haven’t given five minutes to wondering how the vampire got to where it is?”

“I—”

“Yeah,” Han said.

“I’m more concerned with the thing’s future than I am with its past,” Davis said, “but yes, I have wondered about where it came from. There’s a lot of science I don’t know, but I’m not sure about an alien being able to survive on human blood—about an alien needing human blood. It could be, I guess; it just seems a bit of a stretch.”

“You’re saying it came from here,” the Lieutenant said.

“That’s bullshit,” Lee said.

“Why shouldn’t it?” Davis said. “There’s been life on Earth for something like three point seven *billion* years. Are you telling me this couldn’t have developed?”

“Your logic’s shaky,” the Lieutenant said. “Just because something hasn’t been disproved doesn’t mean it’s true.”

“All I’m saying is, we don’t know everything that’s ever been alive on the planet.”

“Point taken,” the Lieutenant said, “but this thing lives above—well above the surface of the planet. How do you explain that?”

“Some kind of escape pod,” Davis said. “I mean, you guys know about the asteroid, right? The one that’s supposed to have wiped out the dinosaurs? Suppose this guy and his friends—suppose their city was directly in this asteroid’s path? Maybe our thing was the only one who made it to the rockets on time? Or maybe it built this itself.”

“Like Superman,” Lee said, “only he’s a vampire, and he doesn’t leave Krypton, he just floats around it so he can snack on the other survivors.”

“Sun,” Han said.

“What?” Lee said.

“Yellow sun,” Han said.

Davis said, “He means Superman needs a yellow sun for his powers. Krypton had a red sun, so he wouldn’t have been able to do much snacking.”

“Yeah, well, we have a yellow sun,” Lee said, “so what’s the problem?”

“Never mind.”

“Or maybe you’ve figured out the real reason the dinosaurs went extinct,” Lee said. “Vampires got them all.”

“That’s clever,” Davis said. “You’re very clever, Lee.”

“What about you, sir?” Lee said.

“Me?” the Lieutenant said. “I’m afraid the scenario I’ve invented is much more lurid than either of yours. I incline to the view that the vampire is here as a punishment.”

“For what?” Davis said.

“I haven’t the faintest clue,” the Lieutenant said. “What kind of crime does a monster commit? Maybe it stole someone else’s victims. Maybe it killed another vampire. Whatever it did, it was placed in that coffin and sent out into space. Whether its fellows intended us as its final destination, or planned for it to drift endlessly, I can’t say. But I wonder if its blood-drinking—that craving—might not be part of its punishment.”

“How?” Lee said.

“Say the vampire’s used to feeding on a substance like blood, only better, more nutritious, more satisfying. Part of the reason for sending it here is that all that will be available to it is this poor substitute that leaves it perpetually thirsty. Not only does it have to cross significant distances, expose itself to potential harm to feed, the best it can do will never be good enough.”

“That,” Lee said, “is fucked up.”

“There’s a reason they made me an officer,” the Lieutenant said. He turned to Han. “What about you, Han? Any thoughts concerning the nature of our imminent guest?”

“Devil,” Han said.

“Ah,” the Lieutenant said.

“Which?” Lee asked. “A devil, or the Devil?”

Han shrugged.

11

2005-2006

To start with, the Lieutenant called once a week, on a Saturday night. Davis could not help reflecting on what this said about the state of the man's life, his marriage, that he spent the peak hours of his weekend in a long-distance conversation with a former subordinate—as well as the commentary their calls offered on his own state of affairs, that not only was he always in his apartment for the Lieutenant's call, but that starting late Thursday, up to a day earlier if his week was especially shitty, he looked forward to it.

There was a rhythm, almost a ritual, to each call. The Lieutenant asked Davis how he'd been; he answered, "Fine, sir," and offered a précis of the last seven days at Home Depot, which tended to consist of a summary of his assistant manager's most egregious offenses. If he'd steered clear of Adams, he might list the titles of whatever movies he'd rented, along with one- or two-sentence reviews of each. Occasionally, he would narrate his latest failed date, recasting stilted frustration as comic misadventure. At the conclusion of his recitation, Davis would swat the Lieutenant's question back to him. The Lieutenant would answer, "Can't complain," and follow with a distillation of his week that focused on his dissatisfaction with his position at Stillwater, a defense contractor who had promised him a career as exciting as the one he'd left but delivered little more than lunches, dinners, and cocktail parties at which the Lieutenant was trotted out, he said, so everyone could admire his goddamned plastic leg and congratulate his employers on hiring him. At least the money was decent, and Barbara enjoyed the opportunity to dress up and go out to nicer places than he'd ever been able to afford. The Lieutenant did not speak about his children; although if asked, he would say that they were hanging in there. From time to time, he shared news of Lee, whom he called on Sunday and whose situation never seemed to improve that much, and Han, whose sister he e-mailed every Monday and who reported that her brother was making progress with his injuries; in fact, Han himself was starting to e-mail the Lieutenant.

This portion of their conversation, which Davis thought of as the Prelude, over, the real reason for the call—what Davis thought of as the SITREP—ensued. The Lieutenant, whose sentences hitherto had been loose, lazy, tightened his syntax as he quizzed Davis about the status of the Plan. In response, Davis kept his replies short, to the point. Have we settled on a

location? the Lieutenant would ask. Yes sir, Davis would say, Thompson's Grove. That was the spot in the Catskills, the Lieutenant would say, south slope of Winger Mountain, about a half mile east of the principle trail to the summit. Exactly, sir, Davis would say. Research indicates the Mountain itself is among the least visited in the Catskill Preserve, and Thompson's Grove about the most obscure spot on it. The location is sufficiently removed from civilian populations not to place them in immediate jeopardy, yet still readily accessible by us. Good, good, the Lieutenant would say. I'll notify Lee and Han.

The SITREP finished, Davis and the Lieutenant would move to Coming Attractions: review their priorities for the week ahead, wish one another well, and hang up. As the months slid by and the Plan's more elaborate elements came into play—especially once Davis commenced his experiments dosing himself with adrenaline—the Lieutenant began adding the odd Wednesday night to his call schedule. After Davis had determined the proper amount for inducing a look through the Shadow's eyes—and after he'd succeeded in affecting the thing a second time, causing it to release its hold on a man Davis was reasonably sure was a Somali pirate—the Wednesday exchanges became part of their routine. Certainly, they helped Davis and the Lieutenant to coordinate their experiences interrupting the Shadow's routine with the reports coming in from Lee and Han, which arrived with increasing frequency once Lee and Han had found their adrenaline doses and were mastering the trick of interfering with the Shadow. However, in the moment immediately preceding their setting their respective phones down, Davis would be struck by the impression that the Lieutenant and he were on the verge of saying something else, something more—he couldn't say what, exactly, only that it would be significant in a way—in a different way from their usual conversation. It was how he'd felt in the days leading up to Fallujah, as if, with such momentous events roiling on the horizon, he should be speaking about important matters, meaningful things.

Twice, they came close to such an exchange. The first time followed a discussion of the armaments the Lieutenant had purchased at a recent gun show across the border in Pennsylvania. "God love the NRA," he'd said and listed the four Glock 21s's, sixteen extra clips, ten boxes of .45

ammunition, four AR-15's, sixteen extra high-capacity magazines for them, thirty boxes of 223 Remington ammo, and four USGI M7 bayonets.

"Jesus, sir," Davis had said when the Lieutenant was done. "That's a shitload of ordnance."

"I stopped at the grenade launcher," the Lieutenant said. "It seemed excessive."

"You do remember how much effect our guns had on the thing the last time…"

"Think of this as a supplement to the Plan. Even with one of us on board, once the thing shows up, it's going to be a threat. We know it's easier to hit when someone's messing with its controls, so let's exploit that. The more we can tag it, the more we can slow it down, improve our chances of using your secret weapon on it."

"Fair enough."

"Good. I'm glad you agree."

Davis was opening his mouth to suggest possible positions the four of them might take around the clearing when the Lieutenant said, "Davis."

"Sir?"

"Would you say you've had a good life? Scratch that—would you say you've had a satisfactory life?"

"I… I don't know. I guess so."

"I've been thinking about my father these past few days. It's the anniversary of his death, twenty-one years ago this Monday. He came here from Mexico City when he was sixteen, worked as a fruit picker for a couple of years, then fell into a job at a diner. He started bussing tables, talked his way into the kitchen, and became the principle cook for the night shift. That was how he met my mother: she was a waitress there. She was from Mexico, too, although the country—apparently, she thought my old man was some kind of city-slicker, not to be trusted by a virtuous girl. I guess she was right, because my older brother was born seven months after their wedding. But I came along two years after that, so I don't think that was the only reason for them tying the knot.

“He died when I was five, my father. An embolism burst in his brain. He was at work, just getting into the swing of things. The coroner said he was dead before he reached the floor. He was twenty-seven. What I wonder is, when he looked at his life, at everything he’d done, was it what he wanted? Even if it was different, was it enough?

“How many people do you suppose exit this world satisfied with what they’ve managed to accomplish in it, Davis? How many of our fellows slipped their mortal coils content with what their eighteen or twenty-one or twenty-seven years had meant?”

“There was the Mission,” Davis said. “Ask them in public, and they’d laugh, offer some smartass remark, but talk to them one-on-one, and they’d tell you they believed in what we were doing, even if things could get pretty fucked up. I’m not sure if that would’ve been enough for Lugo, or Manfred—for anyone—but it would’ve counted for something.”

“True,” the Lieutenant said. “The question is, will something do?”

“I guess it has to.”

Their second such conversation came two weeks before the weekend the four of them were scheduled to travel to upstate New York. They were reviewing the final draft of the Plan, which Davis thought must be something like the Plan version 22.0—although little had changed in the way of the principles since they’d finalized them a month earlier. Ten minutes before dawn, they would take up their positions in the trees around the clearing. If north was twelve o’clock, then Lee and Han would be at twelve—necessary because Han would be injecting himself at T minus one minute and would require protection—the Lieutenant would take two, and Davis three. The woods were reasonably thick: if they positioned themselves about ten feet in, then the Shadow would be unable to come in on top of them. If it wanted them, it would have to land, shift to foot, and that would be the cue for the three of them aiming their AR-15’s to fire. In the meantime, Han would have snuck on board the Shadow and be preparing to jam it. As soon as he saw the opportunity, he would do his utmost to take the thing’s legs out from under it, a maneuver he had been rehearsing for several weeks and become reasonably proficient at. The average time Han guesstimated he’d been able to knock the Shadow’s legs

out was fifteen seconds, though he had reached the vicinity of thirty once. This would be their window: the instant the thing's legs crumpled, two of them had to be up and on it, probably Davis and Lee since the Lieutenant wasn't placing any bets on his sprinter's start. One of them would draw the Shadow's notice, the other hit it with the secret weapon. If for any reason the first attacker failed, the second could engage if he saw the opportunity; otherwise, he would have to return to the woods, because Han's hold on the thing would be wearing off. Once the Lieutenant observed this, he would inject himself and they would begin round two. Round two was the same as round one except for the presumed lack of one man, just as round three counted on two of them being gone. Round four, the Lieutenant said, was him eating a bullet. By that point, there might not be anything he could do to stop the ugly son of a bitch drinking his blood, but that didn't mean he had to stay around for the event.

Davis knew they would recite the Plan again on Saturday, and then next Wednesday, and then the Saturday after that, and then the Wednesday two weeks from now. At the Quality Inn in Kingston, they would recite the Plan, and again as they drove into the Catskills, and yet again as they hiked up Winger Mountain. "Preparation," the Lieutenant had said in Iraq, "is what insures you will fuck up only eighty percent of what you are trying to do." If the exact numbers sounded overly optimistic to Davis, he agreed with the general sentiment.

Without preamble, the Lieutenant said, "You know, Davis, when my older brother was twenty-four, he left his girlfriend for a married Russian émigrée six years his senior—whom he had met, ironically enough, through his ex, who had been tutoring Margarita, her husband, Sergei, and their four-year-old, Stasu, in English."

"No sir," Davis said, "I'm pretty sure you never told me this."

"You have to understand," the Lieutenant went on, "until this point, my brother, Alberto, had led a reasonably sedate and unimpressive life. Prior to this, the most daring thing he'd done was go out with Alexandra, the tutor, who was Jewish, which made our very Catholic mother very nervous. Yet here he was, packing his clothes and his books, emptying his meager bank account, and driving out of town with Margarita in the passenger's seat and Stasu in the back with all the stuff they couldn't squeeze in the trunk. They

headed west, first to St. Louis for a couple of months, next to New Mexico for three years, and finally to Portland—actually, it's just outside Portland, but I can never remember the name of the town.

"She was a veterinarian, Margarita. With Alberto's help, she succeeded in having her credentials transferred over here. Has her own practice, these days, treats horses, cows, farm animals. Alberto helps her; he's her assistant and office manager. Sergei gave them custody of Stasu; they have two more kids, girls, Helena and Catherine. Beautiful kids, my nieces.

"You have any brothers or sisters, Davis?"

"A younger brother, sir. He wants to be a priest."

"Really?"

"Yes, sir."

"Isn't that funny."

12

5:53 A.M.

Lying on the ground he'd swept clear of rocks and branches, his rifle propped on a small log, the sky a red bowl overhead, Davis experienced a moment of complete and utter doubt. Not only did the course of action on which they had set out appear wildly implausible, but everything from the courtyard in Fallujah on acquired the sheen of the unreal, the delusional. An eight-foot-tall space vampire? Visions of soaring through the sky, of savaging scores of men, women, and children around the globe? Injecting himself with adrenaline, for Christ's sake? What was any of this but the world's biggest symptom, a massive phantasy his mind had conjured to escape a reality it couldn't bear? What had happened—what scene was the Shadow substituting for? Had they in fact found a trap in the courtyard, an IED that had shredded them in its fiery teeth? Was he lying in a hospital bed somewhere, his body ruined, his mind hopelessly crippled?

When the Shadow was standing in the clearing, swinging its narrow head from side to side, Davis felt something like relief. If this dark thing and its depravities were a hallucination, he could be true to it. The Shadow parted its fangs as if tasting the dawn. Davis tensed, prepared to find himself

someplace else, subject to a clip from the thing's history, but the worst he felt was a sudden buzzing in his skull that reminded him of nothing so much as the old fuse box in his parents' basement. He adjusted his rifle and squeezed the trigger.

The air rang with gunfire. Davis thought his first burst caught the thing in the belly: he saw it step back, though that might have been due to either Lee or the Lieutenant, who had fired along with him. Almost too fast to follow, the Shadow jumped, a black scribble against the sky, but someone anticipated its leap and aimed ahead of it. At least one of the bullets connected; Davis saw the Shadow's right eye pucker. Stick-arms jerking, it fell at the edge of the treeline, ten feet in front of him. He shot at its head, its shoulders. Geysers of dirt marked his misses. The Shadow threw itself backwards, but collapsed where it landed.

"NOW!" the Lieutenant screamed.

Davis grabbed for his stake with his left hand as he dropped the rifle from his right. Almost before his fingers had closed on the weapon, he was on his feet and rushing into the clearing. To the right, Lee burst out of the trees, his stake held overhead in both hands, his mouth open in a bellow. In front of them, the Shadow was thrashing from side to side like the world's largest insect pinned through the middle. Its claws scythed grass, bushes. Davis saw that its right eye had indeed been hit, and partially collapsed. Lee was not slowing his charge. Davis sprinted to reach the Shadow at the same time.

Although the thing's legs were motionless, its claws were fast as ever. As Davis came abreast of it, jabbing at its head, its arm snapped in his direction. Pain razored up his left arm. Blood spattered the grass, the Shadow's head jerked toward him, and the momentary distraction this offered was, perhaps, what allowed Lee to tumble into a forward roll that dropped him under the Shadow's other claw and up again to drive his stake down into the base of its throat. Reaching for the cellphone in his shirt pocket, Davis backpedaled. The thing's maw gaped as Lee held on to shove the weapon as far as it would go. The Shadow twisted and thrust its claws into Lee's collarbone and ribs. His eyes bulged and he released the stake. Davis had the cellphone in his hand. The Shadow tore its claw from Lee's chest and ripped him open. Davis pressed the three and hit SEND.

In the woods, there was a white flash and the *crump* of explosives detonating. A cloud of debris rushed between the trunks. The Shadow jolted as if a bolt of lightning had speared it.

"SHIT!" the Lieutenant was screaming. "SHIT!"

The Shadow was on its feet, Lee dangling from its left claw like a child's bedraggled plaything. Davis backpedaled. With its right claw, the Shadow reached for the stake jutting from its throat. Davis pressed the two and SEND.

He was knocked from his feet by the force of the blast, which shoved the air from his lungs and pushed sight and sound away from him. He was aware of the ground pressing against his back, a fine rain of particles pattering his skin, but his body was contracted around his chest, which could not bring in any air. Suffocating—he was suffocating. He tried to move his hands, his feet, but his extremities did not appear to be receiving his brain's instructions. Perhaps his hand-crafted bomb had accomplished what the Shadow could not.

What he could feel of the world was bleeding away.

13

2006

Although Lee wanted to wait for sunset, if not total darkness, a preference Davis shared, the Lieutenant insisted they shoulder their packs and start the trail up Winger Mountain while the sun would be broadcasting its light for another couple of hours. At the expressions on Lee and Davis's faces, he said, "Relax. The thing sweeps the Grove first thing in the morning. It's long gone, off feeding someplace."

The trail was not unpleasant. Had they been so inclined, its lower reaches were wide enough that they could have walked them two abreast. (They opted for single file, Lee taking point, Han next, the Lieutenant third, and Davis bringing up the rear. It spread the targets out.) The ground was matted with the leaves of the trees that flanked the trail and stationed the gradual slopes to either side. (While he had never been any good at keeping the names of such things straight, Davis had an idea the trees were a mix of

maple and oak, the occasional white one a birch.) With their crowns full of leaves, the trees almost obscured the sky's blue emptiness. (All the same, Davis didn't look up any more than he could help.)

They reached the path to Thompson's Grove sooner than Davis had anticipated. A piece of wood weathered gray and nailed to a tree chest-high pointed right, to a narrower route that appeared overgrown a hundred yards or so in the distance. Lee withdrew the machete he had sheathed on his belt and struck the sign once, twice, until it flew off the tree into the forest.

"Hey," Davis said, "that's vandalism."

"Sue me," Lee said.

Once they were well into the greenery, the mosquitoes, which had ventured only the occasional scout so long as they kept to the trail, descended in clouds. "Damnit!" the Lieutenant said, slapping his cheek. "I used bugspray."

"Probably tastes like dessert topping to them, sir," Lee called. "Although, damn! at this rate, there won't be any blood left in us for Count Dracula."

Thompson's Grove was an irregular circle, forty feet across. Grass stood thigh-high. A few bushes punctuated the terrain. Davis could feel the sky hungry above them. Lee and Han walked the perimeter while he and the Lieutenant stayed near the trees. All their rifles were out. Lee and Han declared the area secure, but the four of them waited until the sun was finally down to clear the center of the Grove and build their fire.

Lee had been—Davis supposed the word was *off*, since they'd met in Kingston that morning. His eyes shone in his face, whose flesh seemed drawn around the bones. When Davis embraced him in the lobby of the Quality Inn, it had been like putting his arms around one of the support cables on a suspension bridge, something bracing an enormous weight. It might be the prospect of their upcoming encounter, although Davis suspected there was more to it. The Lieutenant's most recent report had been that Lee was continuing to struggle: Shari had won custody of Douglas, with whom Lee was permitted supervised visits every other Saturday. He'd enrolled at his local community college, but stopped attending classes after the first week. The Lieutenant wasn't sure he'd go so far as to call Lee an alcoholic, but there was no doubt the man liked his beer

a good deal more than was healthy. After the wood was gathered and stacked, the fire kindled, the sandwiches Davis had prepared distributed, Lee cleared his throat and said, “I know the Lieutenant has an order he wants us to follow, but there’s something I need to know about.”

“All right,” the Lieutenant said through a mouthful of turkey on rye, “ask away.”

“It’s the connection we have to the thing,” Lee said. “Okay, so: we’ve got a direct line into its central nervous system. The right amount of adrenaline, and we can hijack it. Problem is, the link works both ways. At least, we know that, when the thing’s angry, it can look out of our eyes. What if it can do more? What if it can do to us what we’ve done to it, take us over?”

“There’s been no evidence of that,” Davis said. “Don’t you think, if it could do that, it would have by now?”

“Not necessarily,” Lee said.

“Oh? Why not?”

“Why would it need to? We’re trying to get its attention; it doesn’t need to do anything to get ours.”

“It’s an unknown,” the Lieutenant said. “It’s conceivable the thing could assume control of whoever’s hooked up to it and try to use him for support. I have to say, though, that even if it could possess one of us, I have a hard time imagining it doing so while the rest of us are trying to shorten its lifespan. To tell you the truth, should we succeed in killing it, I’d be more worried about it using the connection as a means of escape.”

“Escape?” Davis said.

Lee said, “The Lieutenant means it leaves its body behind for one of ours.”

“Could it do that?”

“I don’t know,” the Lieutenant said. “I only mention it as a worst-case scenario. Our ability to share its perceptions, to affect its actions, seems to suggest some degree of congruity between the thing and us. On the other hand, it is a considerable leap from there to its being able to inhabit us.”

“Maybe that’s how it makes more of itself,” Lee said. “One dies, one’s born.”

“Phoenix,” Han said.

“This is all pretty speculative,” Davis said.

“Yes it is,” the Lieutenant said. “Should the thing seize any of us, however, it will have been speculation well-spent.”

“What do you propose, then, sir?” Davis said.

“Assuming any of us survives the morning,” the Lieutenant said, “we will have to proceed with great caution.” He held up his pistol.

14

6:42 A.M.

Davis opened his eyes to a hole in the sky. Round, black—for a moment, he had the impression the earth had gained a strange new satellite, or that some unimaginable catastrophe had blown an opening in the atmosphere, and then his vision adjusted and he realized that he was looking up into the barrel of the Lieutenant’s Glock. The man himself half crouched beside Davis, his eyes narrowed. His lips moved, and Davis struggled to pick his words out of the white noise ringing in his ears.

“Davis,” he said. “You there?”

“Yeah,” Davis said. Something was burning; a charcoal reek stung his nostrils. His mouth tasted like ashes. He pushed himself up on his elbows. “Is it—”

“Whoa,” the Lieutenant said, holding his free hand up like a traffic cop. “Take it easy, soldier. That was some blast.”

“Did we—”

“We did.”

“Yeah?”

“We blew it to Kingdom Come,” the Lieutenant said. “No doubt there are pieces of it scattered here and there, but the majority of it is so much dust.”

“Lee—”

“You saw what the thing did to him—although, stupid motherfucker, it serves him right, grabbing the wrong goddamned stake. Of all the stupid

fucking…”

Davis swallowed. “Han?”

The Lieutenant shook his head.

Davis lay back. “Fuck.”

“Never mind,” the Lieutenant said. His pistol had not moved. “Shit happens. The question before us now is, Did it work? Are we well and truly rid of that thing, that fucking blood-drinking monster, or are we fooling ourselves? What do you say, Davis?”

“I…” His throat was dry. “Lee grabbed the wrong one?”

“He did.”

“How is that possible?”

“I don’t know,” the Lieutenant said. “I do not fucking know.”

“I specifically gave each of us—”

“I know; I watched you. In the excitement of the moment, Lee and Han must have mixed them up.”

“Mixed…” Davis raised his hands to his forehead. Behind the Lieutenant, the sky was a blue chasm.

“Or could be, the confusion was deliberate.”

“What?”

“Maybe they switched stakes on purpose.”

“No.”

“I don’t think so, either, but we all know it wasn’t much of a life for Han.”

“That doesn’t mean—”

“It doesn’t.”

“Jesus.” Davis sat up.

The Lieutenant steadied his gun. “So?”

“I take it you’re fine.”

“As far as I’ve been able to determine, yes.”

“Could the thing have had something to do with it?”

“The mix-up?”

“Made Han switch the stakes or something?”

“That presumes it knew what they were, which supposes it had been spying on us through Han’s eyes for not a few hours, which assumes it comprehended us—our language, our technology—in excess of prior evidence.”

“Yeah,” Davis said. “Still.”

“It was an accident,” the Lieutenant said. “Let it go.”

“What makes you so sure you’re all right?”

“I’ve had no indications to the contrary. I appear in control of my own thoughts and actions. I’m aware of no alien presence crowding my mind. While I am thirsty, I have to desire to quench that thirst from one of your arteries.”

“Would you be, though? Aware of the thing hiding in you?”

The Lieutenant shrugged. “Possibly not. You’re taking a long time to answer my question; you know that.”

“I don’t know how I am,” Davis said. “No, I can’t feel the thing either, and no, I don’t want to drink your blood. Is that enough?”

“Davis,” the Lieutenant said, “I will do this. You need to understand that. You are as close to me as anyone, these days, and I will shoot you in the head if I deem it necessary. If I believed the thing were in me, I would turn this gun on myself without a second thought. Am I making myself clear? Let me know it’s over, or let me finish it.” The Lieutenant’s face was flushed.

“All right,” Davis said. He closed his eyes. “All right.” He took a deep breath. Another.

When he opened his eyes, he said, “It’s gone.”

“You’re positive.”

“Yes, sir.”

“You cannot be lying to me.”

“I know. I’m not.”

The end of the pistol wavered, and for a moment Davis was certain that the Lieutenant was unconvinced, that he was going to squeeze the trigger

anyway. He wondered if he'd see the muzzle flash.

Then the pistol lowered and the Lieutenant said, "Good man." He holstered the gun and extended his hand. "Come on. There's a lot we have to do."

Davis caught the Lieutenant's hand and hauled himself to his feet. Behind the Lieutenant, he saw the charred place that had been the Shadow, Lee's torn and blackened form to one side of it. Further back, smoke continued to drift out of the spot in the trees where Han had lain. The Lieutenant turned and started walking toward the trees. He did not ask, and Davis did not tell him, what he had seen with his eyes closed. He wasn't sure how he could have said that the image behind his eyelids was the same as the image in front of them: the unending sky, blue, ravenous.

City of the Dog

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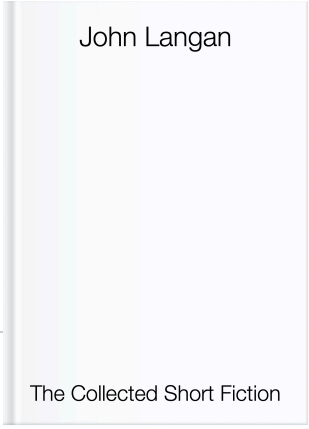

1

I thought it was a dog. From the other side of the lot, that was what it most resembled: down on all fours; hair plastered to its pale, skeletal trunk by the rain that had us hurrying down the sidewalk; head drawn into a snout. It was injured—that much was clear. Even with the rain rinsing its leg, a jagged tear wept fresh blood that caught the headlights of the cars turning onto Central—that had caught my eye, caused me to slow.

Kaitlyn walked on a few paces before noticing that I had stopped at the edge of the lot where one of the thrift stores we'd plundered for cheap books and cassette tapes had burned to the ground the previous spring. (The space had been cleared soon thereafter, with conflicting reports of a Pizza Hut or Wendy's imminent, but as of mid-November it was still a gap in the row of tired buildings that lined this stretch of Central Ave.) Arms crossed over the oversized Army greatcoat that was some anonymous Soviet officer's contribution to her wardrobe, my girlfriend hurried back to me. "What is it?"

I pointed. "That dog looks like it's pretty hurt." I stepped onto the lot. The ground squelched under my foot.

"What are you doing?"

"I don't know. I just want to see if he's all right."

"Shouldn't you call the cops? I mean, it could be dangerous. Look at the size of it."

She was right. This was not one of your toy dogs; this was not even a standard-sized mutt. This animal was as large as a wolfhound—larger. It was big as Latka, my Uncle Karl and Aunt Belinda's German Shepherd, had

appeared to me when I was seven and terrified of her, and more terrified still of her ability to smell my fear, which my cousins assured me would enrage her. For a moment, my palms were slick, and I felt a surge of lightness at the top of my chest. Then I set to walking across the lot.

Behind me, Kaitlyn made her exasperated noise. I could see her flapping her arms to either side, the way she did when she was annoyed with me.

Puddles sprawled across the lot. I leapt a particularly wide one and landed in a hole that plunged my foot into freezing water past the ankle. “Shit!” My sneaker, sock, the bottom of my jeans were soaked. There was no time to run back to the apartment to change. It appeared I’d be walking around the QE2 with one sopping sneaker for the rest of the night. I could hear Kaitlyn saying she’d *told* me to wear my boots.

The dog had not fled at my approach, not even when I dunked my foot. Watching me from the corner of its eye, it shuffled forward a couple of steps. The true size of the thing was remarkable; had it raised itself on its hind legs, it would have been as tall as I was. There was something about the way it walked, its hips high, its shoulders low, as if it were unused to this pose, that made the image of it standing oddly plausible. Big as the dog was, it didn’t seem especially menacing. It was an assemblage of bones over which a deficit of skin had been stretched, so that I could distinguish each of the oddly shaped vertebrae that formed the arch of its spine. Its fur was pale, patchy; as far as I could see, its tail was gone. Its head was foreshortened, not the kind of elongated, vulpine look you expect with dogs bred big for hunting or fighting; although its ears were pointed, standing straight up, and ran a good part of the way down the side of its skull. I was less interested in its ears, however, than I was its teeth, and whether it was showing them to me. It continued to study me from one eye, but it appeared to be tolerating my presence well enough. Hands out and open in front of me, I stepped closer.

As I did, the thing’s smell, diluted, no doubt, by the rain, rolled up into my nostrils. It was the thick, mineral odor of dirt, so dense I coughed and brought a hand to my mouth and nose. The taste of soil and clay coated my tongue. I coughed again, turned my head, and spat. “I hope you appreciate this,” I said, wiping my mouth. I squinted at the wound on its leg.

A wide patch of the dog's thigh had been scraped clear of hair and skin, pink muscle laid bare. Broader than it was deep, it was the kind of injury that bleeds dramatically and seems to take forever to quiet. While I doubted it was life-threatening, I was sure it was painful. How the dog had come by this wound, I couldn't say. When we were kids, my younger brother had been famous for this sort of scrape, but those had been from wiping out on his bike in the school parking lot. Had this thing been dragged over a stretch of pavement, struck by a car, perhaps, and sent skidding across the road? Whatever the cause, I guessed the rain washing it was probably a good thing, cleaning away the worst debris. I bent for a closer inspection.

And was on my back, the dog's forepaws pressing my chest with irresistible force, its face inches from mine. There wasn't even time for me to be shocked by its speed. Its lips curled away from a rack of yellowed fangs, the canines easily as long as my index finger. Its breath was hot, rank, as if its tongue were rotten in its mouth. I wanted to gag, but didn't dare move. Rain spilled from the thing's cheeks, its jaw, in shining streams onto my neck, my chin. The dog was silent; no growl troubled its throat; but its eyes said that it was ready to tear my windpipe out. They were unlike any eyes I had looked into, irises so pale they might have been white surrounded by sclerae so dark they were practically black, full past the brim with—I wouldn't call it intelligence so much as a kind of undeniable *presence*.

As fast as it had put me down, the thing was gone, fled into the night and the rain. For a few seconds I stayed where I was, unsure if the dog were planning to return. Once it was clear the thing was not coming back, I pushed myself up from the sodden ground. "Terrific," I said. My wet sneaker was the least of my worries: it had been joined by jeans soaked through to my boxers; not to mention, my jacket had flipped up when I'd fallen, and the back of my shirt was drenched. "So much for the injured dog." Although doing so made me uncomfortably aware of the space between my shoulders, I turned around and plodded across the lot. This time, I didn't worry about the puddles.

That Kaitlyn was nowhere to be found, had not waited to witness my adventure with man's best friend, and most likely had proceeded to the club without me, was the sorry punchline to what had become an unfunny joke.

Briefly, I entertained the idea that she might have run down the street in search of help, but a rapid walk the rest of the way to QE2 showed most shops closed, and the couple that were open empty of a short woman bundled into a long, green coat, her red hair tucked under a black beret. At the club's door, under the huge QE2 sign, I contemplated abandoning the night's plans and returning to my apartment on State Street, a trek that would insure any remaining dry spots on my person received their due saturation. I was sufficiently annoyed with Kaitlyn for the prospect of leaving her to wonder what had become of me to offer a certain appeal composed of roughly equal parts righteous indignation and self-pity. However, there had been a chance we might meet Chris here, and the possibility of her encountering him with me nowhere to be found sent me to the door to pay the cover.

Inside, a cloud of smoke hung low over the crowd, the din of whose combined conversation was sufficient to dull the Smithereens throbbing from the sound system. The club was more full than I would have expected for the main act that Wednesday, a performance poet named Marius Elliott who was accompanied by a five-piece rock band, guitars, bass, keyboards, drums, the whole thing. Marius, who favored a short black leather jacket and tight black jeans on-stage, was an instructor at Columbia-Greene Community College, where he taught Freshman Writing. He was a lousy poet, and a lousy performer, too, but he was the friend of a friend I worked with, and the band was pretty good, enough so that they should have ditched him and found a frontman with more talent. This was Marius's second show at the QE2; I couldn't understand why the owner had booked him after hearing him the first time. While the club did feature poets, they tended toward the edgier end of the literary spectrum, in keeping with the place's reputation as the Capital District's leading showcase for up-and-coming post-punk bands. (That same friend from work had seen the Chili Peppers play there before they were red hot.) Marius wrote poems about eating breakfast alone, or walking his dog in the woods behind his apartment. Maybe the owner's tastes were more catholic than I knew; maybe he owed someone a favor.

In his low, melancholy voice, the Smithereens' lead told the room about the girl he dreamed of behind the wall of sleep. I couldn't see Kaitlyn. Given

the dim light and number of people milling between the stage and bar, not to mention that Kaitlyn was hardly tall, there was no cause for my stomach to squeeze the way it did. Chris wasn't visible, either. Trying not to make too much of the coincidence, I pushed my way through to the bar, where I shouted for a Macallan I couldn't really afford, but that earned me a respectful nod from the bartender's shaven head.

The Scotch flaring on my tongue, I stepped away to begin a protracted circuit of the room in quest of my girlfriend. The crowd was a mix of what looked like Marius's community college students, their blue jeans and sweatshirts as good as uniforms, and the local poetry crowd, split between those affecting different shades of black and those whose brighter colors proclaimed their allegiance to some notion of sixties counter-culture. Here and there, an older man or woman in a professorial jacket struggled not to let the strain of trying to appear comfortable show; Marius's colleagues, I guessed, or professors from SUNY. The air was redolent with the odors of wet denim, cotton, and hair, of burning tobacco and pot, of beer, of sweat. I exchanged enough nods with enough faces I half recognized for me not to feel too alone, and traded a few sentences with a girl whose pretty face and hip-length blond hair I remembered but whose name eluded me. The Smithereens finished singing about blood and roses and were replaced by the Screaming Trees, their gravelly voiced lead uttering the praises of sweet oblivion.

At the end of forty-five minutes that took me to every spot in the club except the Ladies Room, and that left the Macallan a phantom in my glass, I was no closer to locating Kaitlyn. (Or Chris, for that matter, although I was ignoring this.) Once more at the bar, I set the empty glass on its surface and ordered another—a double, this round. A generous swallow of it was almost sufficient to quiet the panic uncoiling in my chest.

I was about to embark on another, rapid circuit of the crowd before the show began when I caught someone staring at me. Out of the corner of my eye, I thought the tall, pale figure was Chris, just arrived. I was so relieved to find him here that I couldn't help myself from smiling as I turned to greet him.

The man I saw was not Chris. He was at a guess two decades older, more, the far side of forty. Everything about his face was long, from the stretch of

forehead between his shaggy black hair and shaggy black eyebrows, to the nose that ran from his watery eyes to his narrow mouth, to the lines that grooved the skin from his cheekbones to his jaw, from the edges of his nostrils to the edges of his thin lips. His skin was the color of watery milk, which the black leather jacket and black T-shirt he wore only emphasized. I want to say that, even for a poet, the guy looked unhealthy, but this was no poet. There are people—the mentally ill, the visionary—who emit cues, some subtle, some less so, that they are not traveling the same road as the rest of us. Standing five feet away from me doing nothing that I could see, this man radiated that sensation; it poured off him like a fever. The moment I had recognized he was not Chris, I had been preparing the usual excuse, "Sorry, thought you were someone else," or words close enough, but the apology died in my mouth, incinerated by the man's presence. The Screaming Trees were saying they'd heard it on the wing that I was going to die. I could not look away from the man's eyes. Their irises were so pale they might have been white, surrounded by sclerae so dark they were practically black. My heart smacked against my chest; my legs trembled madly, all the fear I should have felt lying pinned on my back in that empty lot finally caught up to me. With that thing's teeth at my neck, I hadn't fully grasped how perilous my position had been; now, I was acutely aware of my danger.

Two things happened almost simultaneously. The lights went down for the show, and Chris stood between the man and me, muttering, "Hello," unwrapping his scarf, and asking where Kaitlyn was. The pale man eclipsed, I looked away. When I returned my gaze to where he'd been standing, he was gone. Ignoring Chris's questions, I searched the people standing closest to us. The man was nowhere to be found. What remained of my drink was still in my hand. I finished it and headed to the bar as Marius Elliott and his band took the stage to a smattering of applause and a couple of screams. Chris followed close behind. I was almost grateful enough for him appearing to buy him a drink; instead, I had another double.

2

In the late summer of 1991, I moved to Albany. While I swore to my parents I was leaving Poughkeepsie to accept a position as senior bookseller

at The Book Nook, an independent bookstore located near SUNY Albany's uptown campus—which was true; I had been offered the job—the actual reason I packed all my worldly belongings into my red Hyundai Excel and drove an hour and a half up the Hudson was Kaitlyn Bertolozzi. I believe my parents knew this.

Yet even then, the August morning I turned left up the on-ramp for the Taconic north and sped toward a freedom I had been increasingly desperate for the past four years of commuting to college—even as I pressed on the radio and heard the opening bass line of Golden Earring's "*Twilight Zone*," which I turned up until the steering wheel was thumping with it—even as the early-morning cloud cover split to views of blue sky—the sense of relief that weighted my foot on the gas pedal was alloyed with another emotion, with ambivalence.

At this point, Kaitlyn had been living in Albany for a little more than six months. After completing undergrad a semester early, she had moved north to begin a Master's in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages at the University Center. We had continued to speak to one another several times a week, and I had visited her as often as my school and work schedules permitted, which wasn't very much—once a month, if that. It was on the first of those visits, a couple of weeks after Kaitlyn had moved to the tiny apartment her parents had found her, that she introduced me to Christopher Garofalo.

He was not much taller than I was, but the thick, dark brown hair that rose up from his head gave the impression that he had a good few inches on me. His skin was sallow, except for an oblong scar that reached from over his left eyebrow into his hairline. When Kaitlyn and I met him at Bruegger's Bagels, his neck was swaddled in a scarf that he kept on the length of our lunch, despite the café's stifling heat. He shook my hand when he arrived and when he left, and each time his brown eyes sought out mine. In between, his conversation was sporadic and earnest. Kaitlyn and he had attended the same orientation session at the University for students starting mid-year. Chris was studying to be a geology teacher; after trying to find a living as part of a jazz band, he said, he had decided it was time for a career with more stability.

Once he had departed, I commented on his scarf, which I'd taken as the lingering affectation of a musician; whereupon my girlfriend told me that Chris wore the scarf to cover the scar from a tracheotomy. While my face flushed, she went on to say that he had been in a severe motorcycle accident several years ago, in his early twenties. He hadn't been wearing a helmet and should have been killed; as it was, he'd spent a week in a coma and had to have a steel plate set in his skull, which was the origin of the scar on his forehead. As a consequence of the trauma, he'd experienced intermittent seizures, which had required months of trial-and-error with different medications and combinations of medications to bring under some semblance of control. He was a sweet guy, Kaitlyn said, who was (understandably) self-conscious about the reminders of his accident. I muttered a platitude and changed the subject.

I wasn't especially concerned about my girlfriend having become friendly with another guy so soon; as long as I had known her, Kaitlyn had numbered more men than women among her friends, just as my circle of friends consisted largely of women. She had always had a weakness for what I called her strays, those people whose quirks of character tended to isolate them from the rest of the pack. Driving home that night, I was if anything reassured at a familiar pattern reasserting itself.

Three weeks to the day later, I listened on the phone as Kaitlyn, her voice hitching, told me she'd slept with Chris. While I'd made the same sort of confession to previous girlfriends, I'd never been on the receiving end of it before. I moved a long way away from myself, down a tunnel at one end of which was the thick yellow receiver pressed to my ear, full of Kaitlyn crying that she was sorry, while the other end plunged into blackness. Dark spots crowded my vision. I hung up on her sobs, then spent five minutes furiously pacing the bedroom that had shrunk to the size of a cage. Everything was wrong; a sinkhole had opened under me, dumping my carefully arranged future into muddy ruin. Before I knew what I was doing, the phone was in my hand and I was dialing Kaitlyn.

The next month was an ordeal of phone calls, two, three, four times a week. After the initial flourish of apologies and recriminations, we veered wildly between forced cheerfulness and poorly concealed resentment. Once Kaitlyn started to say that Chris was very upset about the entire situation,

and I told her I wasn't interested in hearing about that fucking freak. Another time she complained that she was lonely, to which I replied that I was sure she could find company. Rather than slamming the receiver down, she cajoled me, told me not to be that way, she missed me and couldn't wait until she could see me. However, when I at last drove to see her one Thursday afternoon, Kaitlyn was reserved, almost formal. I wanted nothing more than to go straight to bed, to find in her naked body some measure of reassurance that we would recover from this. Kaitlyn demurred, repeatedly, until I left early, in an obvious huff.

Strangely, Kaitlyn's infidelity and its jagged aftermath only increased my desire to move to Albany. Those moments when regret and anger weren't gnawing at me, I told myself that, had I been there with her, this never would have happened. I could just about shift the blame for her sleeping with Chris onto us having been apart after so long so close together. There were times I could, not exactly pardon what Chris had done, but understand it. Underwriting my effort to reconcile myself to events was my desire to escape my home. As far as I could tell, my father and mother were no worse than any of my friends' parents—and, in one or two cases, they seemed significantly better—but I was past tired of having to be home by twelve and to call if I were going to be later, of having to play chauffeur to my mother and three younger siblings, of having to watch what I said lest my father and I begin an argument from which I inevitably backed off, because he had suffered a heart attack ten years earlier and I was deeply anxious not to be the cause of a second, fatal one. Although I was their oldest child, my parents had a much harder time easing their hold on me than they did with my siblings. My younger brother was already away at R.P.I., enrolled in their Bio-Med program, while my sisters enjoyed privileges I still dreamed of. When I had started at SUNY Huguenot, my father had assured me that, if I commuted to college the first year, I could move onto campus my sophomore year; during a subsequent disagreement, he insisted that the deal had been for me to remain home for two years, and then he and my mother would see about me living in a dorm. After that, I didn't raise the issue again, nor did he or my mother.

Albany/Kaitlyn was my opportunity to extricate myself from the life that seemed intent on maintaining my residence under the roof that had

sheltered me for the last two decades. Every awkward conversation with Kaitlyn shook my hopes of leaving the bed whose end my feet hung over, while the arguments, aftershocks of that original revelation, that struck us shuddered my dream of Albany to rubble. That I went from the black mood that fell on me after Kaitlyn and I had concluded our latest brittle exchange, when I was convinced I would live and die in Poughkeepsie, to driving to my new apartment and job was a testament to almost brute determination. In the end, I had to leave my parents', which meant I had to do whatever was necessary to slice through the apron strings mummifying me, and if that included working through things with Kaitlyn—if it included making peace with Chris, accepting him as her friend—then that was what I would do.

Not only did I make peace with Chris, he was to be my roommate. What would have been impossible, inconceivable, a month before became first plausible and then my plan when I failed to find a place I could afford on my own, and the guy with whom Chris had previously been rooming abruptly moved out. Enough time had passed, I told myself. According to Kaitlyn, Chris was a night owl; he and I would hardly see each other. (I didn't dwell on how she knew this.) I decided I would stay there only until I could find another, better place, and then fuck you, Chris.

As it turned out, though, after more than a year, I was still in that apartment on State Street, in what I referred to as student-hell housing. Ours was the lower half of a two-story house wedged in among other two-story houses, the majority of them family residences that had been re-purposed for college students. My room was at the rear of the place, off the kitchen, and was entered through a kind of folding door more like what you'd find on a closet. Chris inhabited the front room, next to the combination living room-dining room; between us, there was an empty room opposite the bathroom. For reasons unclear to me, that room had remained unoccupied, though I didn't object to the extra distance from Chris. Kaitlyn had been right: he was up late into the night, sequestered in his room, which he did not invite me into and whose door—a single solid piece of wood some previous tenant had painted dark green—he kept closed. Probably the longest conversation I had with him had come when he'd showed me the basement, whose door, outside mine, was locked by a trio of deadbolts. The stairs

down to it bowed perceptibly under my weight, the railing planted a splinter in the base of my thumb. A pair of bare bulbs threw yellow light against the cement walls, the dirt floor. The air was full of dust; I sneezed. Chris showed me the location of the fuse box, how to reset the fuses, the furnace and how to reset it. After I'd been through the procedures for both a couple of times, I pointed to the corner opposite us and said, "What's down there?"

Chris looked at the concrete circle, maybe two and a half feet in diameter, set into the basement floor. A heavy metal bar flaked with rust lay across it; through holes in either end of the bar, thick, heavily rusted chains ran to rings set into smaller pieces of concrete. He shrugged. "I'm not sure. The landlord told me it used to be a coal cellar, but that doesn't make any sense. Some kind of access to the sewers, maybe."

"In a private residence?"

"Yeah, you're right. I don't know."

When he wasn't in his room, Chris was at SUNY, either in class or at the library. Despite this, I saw him a good deal more than I would have wished, especially when Kaitlyn stayed over, which she did on weekends and occasional weeknights. I would be in the kitchen, preparing dinner, while Kaitlyn sat on the green and yellow couch in the living room, reading for one of her classes, and I would hear Chris's door creak open. By the time I carried Kaitlyn's plate through to the folding table that served as the dining room table, Chris would be leaning against the wall across from her, his arms crossed, talking with her about school. Although they stiffened perceptibly as I set Kaitlyn's plate down, they continued their conversation, until I asked Chris if he wanted to join us, there was plenty left, an offer he inevitably refused, politely, claiming he needed to return to his work. During the ensuing meal, Kaitlyn would maintain a constant stream of chatter to which I, preoccupied with what she and Chris had *actually* been discussing, would respond in monosyllables. If the phone rang and Chris happened to answer it, he would linger for a minute or two, talking in a low, pleasant murmur I couldn't decipher before calling to me that it was Kaitlyn. I knew they met for coffee at school every now and again, which seemed to translate into once a week.

Of course the situation was intolerable. Forgiving Chris—believing that what had occurred between him and Kaitlyn was in the past—accepting that they were still friends, but no more than that—all of it had been much easier when I was eighty miles removed from it, when it was a means to the end of me leaving home. As a fact of my daily life, it was a wound that would not heal, whose scab tore free whenever the two of them were in any kind of proximity, whenever Kaitlyn mentioned Chris, or (less frequently) vice versa. Had I known him before this, had we shared some measure of friendship, there might have been another basis on which I could have dealt with Chris. As it was, my principal picture of him was as the guy who had slept with my girlfriend. No matter that we might share the occasional joke, or that he might join Kaitlyn and me when we went to listen to music at local clubs and bars, and try to point out what the musicians were doing well, or even that he might cover my rent one month I needed to have work done on my car, I could not see past that image, and it tormented me. I was more than half convinced Kaitlyn wanted to return to him, and her protests that, if she had, she would have already, did little to persuade me otherwise.

One night, after I'd been in Albany six months, in the wake of a fierce argument that ended with Kaitlyn telling me she was tired of doing penance for a mistake she'd made a year ago, then slamming her apartment door in my face, and me speeding home down Western Avenue's wide expanse, I stood outside Chris's room, ready for a confrontation twelve months overdue. I hadn't bothered to remove my coat, and it seemed to weigh heavier, hotter. My chest was heaving, my hands balled into fists so tight my arms shook. The green door was at the far end of a dark tunnel. I could hear the frat boys who lived above us happily shouting back and forth to one another about a professor who was a real dick. I willed Chris to turn the doorknob, to open his door so that he would find me there and I could ask him what it had been like, if she'd pulled her shirt over her head, pushed down her jeans, or if he'd unhooked her bra, slid her panties to her ankles? Had she lain back on the bed, drawing him onto her, and had she uttered that deep groan when he'd slid all the way up into her? Had she told him to fuck her harder, and when she'd ridden him to that opening of her mouth and closing of her eyes, had she slid her hand between them to cup and squeeze his balls, bringing him to a sudden, thunderous climax? A year's

worth of scenes I'd kept from my mind's eye cavorted in front of it: Kaitlyn recumbent on her bed, her bare body painted crimson by the red light she'd installed in the bedside lamp; Kaitlyn, lying on top of a hotel room table, wearing only the rings on her fingers, her hands pulling her knees up and out; Kaitlyn with her head hanging down, her arms out in front of her, hands pressed against the shower wall, her legs straight and spread, soapy water sluicing off her back, her ass. In all these visions and more, it was not I who was pushing in and out of her, it was Chris—he had spliced himself into my memories, turned them into so much cheap porn. Worse, the look I envisioned on Kaitlyn's face said, shouted that she was enjoying these attentions far more than any I'd ever paid her.

While I desperately wanted to cross the remaining distance to Chris's door and smash my fists against it, kick it in, some inner mechanism would not permit me to take that first step. My jaw ached, I was clenching my teeth so hard, but I could not convert that energy into forward motion. If Chris appeared, then what would happen, would happen. In the meantime, the best I could do was maintain my post.

Perhaps Kaitlyn had called to warn him, but Chris did not leave his room that night. I stood trembling at his door for the better part of an hour, after which I decided to wait for him on the living room couch. I had not yet removed my coat, and I was sweltering. The couch was soft. My lids began to droop. I yawned, then yawned again. The room was growing harder to keep in focus. There was a noise—I thought I heard something. The sound of feet, of many feet, seemed to be outside the front window—no, they were underneath me, in the basement. The next thing I knew, I was waking to early morning light. I could have resumed my position outside Chris's door; instead, I retreated to my room. That was the closest I came to facing him.

Had a friend of mine related even part of the same story to me—told me that his girlfriend had cheated on him, or that he couldn't stop thinking about her betrayal, or that he was sharing an apartment with the other guy—my advice would have been simple: leave. You're in a no-win situation; get out of it. I was in possession of sufficient self-knowledge to be aware of this, but was unable to attach that recognition to decisive action. In an obscure way I could perceive but not articulate, this failing was connected

to my larger experience of Albany, which had been, to say the least, disappointing. Two weeks into it, I had started having doubts about my job at the Book Nook; after a month, those doubts had solidified. Within two months of starting there, I was actively, though discreetly, searching for another position. However, with the economy mired in recession, jobs were scarce on the ground. None of the local bookstores were hiring full-time. I sank three hundred dollars into the services of a job placement company whose representative interviewed me by phone for an hour and produced a one-page résumé whose bland and scanty euphemisms failed to impress me, or any of the positions to which I sent it. I wasted an hour late one Tuesday sitting a test for an insurance position that the man who interviewed me told me I was unlikely to get because I didn't know anyone in the area, and so didn't have a list of people I could start selling to. (He was right: they didn't call me.) I lost an entire Saturday shadowing a traveling salesman as he drove to every beauty salon in and around Albany, hawking an assortment of cheap and gaudy plastic wares to middle-aged women whose faces had shown their suspicion the moment he hauled open their doors. That position I could have had if I'd wanted it, but the prospect was so depressing I returned to The Book Nook the following day. When I heard that their pay was surprisingly good and their benefits better, I seriously considered taking the exam that would allow me to apply for a job as a toll collector on the Thruway, going so far as to find out the dates on which and the locations where the test was being offered. But, unable to imagine telling my parents that I had left the job that at least appeared to have something to do with my undergraduate degree in English for one that required no degree at all—unwilling to face what such a change would reveal about my new life away from home—I never went. I continued to work at The Book Nook, using my employee discount to accumulate novels and short story collections I didn't read, and for which I soon ran out of space, so that I had to stack them on my floor, until my room became a kind of improvised labyrinth.

Nor did the wider world appear to be in any better shape. In addition to its reports on the faltering local and national economies, WAMC, the local public radio station, brought news of the disintegration of Yugoslavia into ethnic enclaves whose sole purpose appeared to be the annihilation of one another through the most savage means possible. The fall of the Berlin

Wall, the breakup of the Soviet Union and end of the Cold War, which had promised brighter days, an end to the nuclear shadow under which I'd grown up, instead had admitted a host of hatreds and grievances kept at bay but not forgotten, and eager to have their bloody day. On EQX, the alternative station out of Vermont, U2 sang about the end of the world, and the melodramatic overstatement of those words seemed to summarize my time in Albany.

By that Wednesday night in November, when I fumbled open the door to the apartment and stumbled in, the Scotches I'd consumed at the QE2 not done with me yet, I had been living in a state of ill-defined dread for longer than I could say, months, at least. I had attempted discussing it with Kaitlyn over dinner the week before we went to see Marius, but the best I could manage was to say that it felt as if I were waiting for the other shoe to drop. "What other shoe?" Kaitlyn had said around a mouthful of dumpling. "The other shoe to what?"

I'd considered answering, "To you and Chris," but we'd been having a nice time, and I had been reluctant to spoil it. To be honest, though there was no doubt she and Chris were part of the equation, they weren't all of it: there were other integers involved whose values I could not identify. To reply "To everything" had seemed too much, so I'd said, "I don't know," and the conversation had moved on.

Yet when I saw that the apartment was dark, and a check of my room showed my bed empty, and a call to Kaitlyn's brought me her answering machine, I knew, with a certainty fueled by alcohol and that deep anxiety, that the other shoe had finally clunked on the floor.

3

For the next couple of days, I continued to dial Kaitlyn's number, leaving a series of messages that veered from blasé to reproachful to angry to conciliatory before cycling back to blasé. I swore that I was not going to her apartment, a vow I kept for almost three days, when I used my key to unlock her door Saturday night. I half expected the chain to be fastened, Kaitlyn to be inside (and not alone), but the door swung open on an empty room. The lights were off. "Kaitlyn?" I called. "Love?"

There was no answer. The apartment was little more than a studio with ambition; it took all of a minute for me to duck my head into the bedroom, the bathroom, to determine that Kaitlyn wasn't there. The answering machine's tally read thirty-one messages; I pressed Play and listened to my voice ascend and descend the emotional register. Mixed in among my messages were brief how-are-you's from Kaitlyn's mother, her younger brother, and Chris. When I recognized his voice, I tensed, but he had called to say he had missed her at the show the other night, as well as for coffee the next day, and he hoped everything was okay. After the last message—me, half an hour prior, trying for casual as I said that I was planning to stop by on my way home from work—I ran through the recordings a second time, searching for something, some clue in her mother's, her younger brother's words to where she had spent the last seventy-two hours. So far as I could hear, there was none. An hour's wait brought neither Kaitlyn nor any additional phone calls, so I left, locking the door behind me.

Two days later, I asked Chris to call Kaitlyn's parents. He was just in from a late-night library session; I had waited for him on the couch. He didn't notice me until he was about to open the door to his room. At my request, he stopped pulling off his gloves and said, "What?"

"I need you to call Kaitlyn's parents for me."

"Why?"

"I want to find out if she's there."

"What do you mean?"

"I haven't seen her since the other night at QE2."

"Maybe she's at her place." He stuffed his gloves in his jacket's pockets, unzipped it.

"I checked there."

"Maybe she didn't want to talk to you."

"No—I have a key. She isn't there. I don't think she has been since Wednesday."

"Of course you do," Chris muttered. "So where is she—at her parents, which is why you want me to call them. Why can't you do it?"

"I don't want to worry them."

Chris stared at me; I could practically hear him thinking, *Or look like the overly possessive boyfriend.* "It's late," he said. "I'm sure—"

"Please," I said. "Please. Look, I know—we—would you just do this for me, please?"

"Fine," he said, although the expression on his face said it was anything but. He hung his jacket on the doorknob and went to the phone.

Kaitlyn's father was still awake. Chris apologized for calling so late but said he was a friend of hers from high school who'd walked through his parents' front door this very minute—his flight had been delayed at O'Hare. He was only in town through tomorrow, and he was hoping to catch up with Kaitlyn, even see her. A pause. Oh, that was right, the last time they had talked, she had told him she was planning to go to Albany. Wow, he guessed it had been a while since they'd spoken. Could her father give him her address, or maybe her phone number? That would be great. Another pause. Chris thanked him, apologized again for the lateness of his call, and wished Kaitlyn's father a good night. "She isn't there," he said once he'd hung up.

"So I gathered."

"The number he gave me is the one for her apartment."

"Okay." I stood from the couch.

"I'm sure everything's all right. Maybe she went to visit a friend."

"Yeah," I said. "A friend."

"Hey—"

"Don't," I said. I started toward my room. "All because I stopped to help a fucking dog…"

"What?"

I stopped. "On the way to the club. There was this stray in that lot over on Central—you know, where the thrift store used to be. It looked like it was in rough shape, so I went to have a look at it—"

"What kind of dog?"

"I don't know, a big one. Huge, skinny, like a wolfhound or something."

Chris's brow lowered. "What color was it?"

"White, I guess. It was missing a lot of fur—no tail, either."

“Its face—did you see its eyes?”

“From about six inches away. Turned out, the thing wasn’t that hurt, after all. Pinned me to the ground, stuck its face right in mine. Could’ve ripped my throat out.”

“Its eyes…”

“This sounds strange, but its eyes were reversed: the whites were black, and the pupils were, well, they weren’t white, exactly, but they were pale —”

“What happened with the dog? Were there any more?”

I shook my head. “It ran off. I don’t know where to.”

“There wasn’t a man with it, was there?”

“Just the dog. What do you mean, a man? Do you know who owns that thing?”

“Nobody owns—never mind. You’d know this guy if you saw him: tall, black hair. He’s white, I mean, really, like-a-ghost white. His face is lined, creased.”

“Who is he?”

“Don’t worry about it. If he wasn’t—”

“He was at the club, afterwards. Right before you arrived.”

“Are you sure?”

“I was about as far away from him as I am from you.”

Now Chris’s face was white. “What happened?”

“Nothing. One minute, he was standing there giving me the heebie-jeebies, the next—”

“Shit!” Chris grabbed his jacket from the doorknob. “Get your coat.”

“Why?”

“Do you have a flashlight?”

“A flashlight?”

“Never mind, I have a spare.” His jacket and gloves on, Chris shouted, “Move!”

“What are you—”

He crossed the room to me in three quick strides. “I know where Kaitlyn is.”

“You do?”

He nodded. “I know where she is. I also know that she’s in a very great deal of danger. I need you to get your coat, and I need you to get your car keys.”

“Kaitlyn’s in danger?”

“Yes.”

“What—how do you know this?”

“I’ll tell you in the car.”

4

For all that I had been residing in the city for over a year, my knowledge of Albany’s geography was at best vague. Aside from a few landmarks such as the QE2 and the Empire State Plaza downtown, my mental map of the place showed a few blocks north and south of my apartment, and spots along the principle east-west avenues, Western, Washington, and Central. I had a better sense of the layout of Dobb’s Ferry, Kaitlyn’s hometown, to which I’d chauffeured her at least one weekend a month the past twelve. Chris told me to head downtown, to Henry Johnson. Once I’d scraped holes in the frost on the windshield and windows and set the heater blowing high, I steered us onto Washington and followed it to the junction with Western, but that was as far as I could go before I had to say, “Now what?”

Chris looked up from the canvas bag he was holding open on his lap while he riffled its contents. Whatever was in the bag clinked and rattled; the strong odor of grease filled the car. “Really?” he said. “You don’t know how to get to Henry Johnson?”

“I’m not good with street names. I’m more of a visual person.”

“Up ahead on the left—look familiar?”

“Actually, no.”

“Well, that’s where we’re going.”

“Well okay.”

I turned off Western, passed over what I realized was a short bridge across a deep gully. “What’s our destination?”

“A place called the Kennel. Heard of it?”

I hadn’t.

“It’s… you’ll see when we get there.”

We drove past shops whose shutters were down for the night, short brick buildings whose best days belonged to another century. Brownstones rode a steep side street. A man wearing a long winter coat and garbage bags taped to his feet pushed a shopping cart with an old television set canted in it along the sidewalk.

“How far is it?”

“I don’t know the exact distance. It should take us about fifteen minutes.”

“Enough time for you to tell me how you know Kaitlyn’s at the Kennel.”

“Not really. Not if you want the full story.”

“I’ll settle for the Cliff’s Notes. Did you take her there?”

“No,” he said, as if the suggestion were wildly inappropriate.

“Then how did she find out about it?”

“She didn’t—she was brought there.”

“Brought? As in, kidnapped?”

Chris nodded.

“How do you know this?”

“Because of the Keeper—the man you saw at the club.”

“The scary guy with the weird eyes.”

“You noticed his eyes.”

“Same as the dog’s.”

“Yes.”

“I don’t… How do you know this guy, the what? The Keeper?”

“Ahead, there,” Chris said, pointing, “keep to the left.”

I did. The cluster of tall buildings that rose over Albany's downtown, the city's effort to imitate its larger sibling at the other end of the Hudson, were behind us, replaced by more modest structures, warehouses guarded by sagging fences, narrow two- and three-story brick buildings, a chrome-infused diner struggling to pretend the fifties were alive and well. As I drove through these precincts, I had the sense I was seeing the city as it really was, the secret face I had intuited after a year under its gaze. I said, "How do you know him?"

"He…" Chris grimaced. "I found out about him."

"What? Is he some kind of, I don't know, a criminal?"

"Not exactly. He's—he's someone who doesn't like to be known."

"Someone… All right, how did you find out about him?"

"Left. My accident—did I ever tell you about my accident? I didn't, did I?"

"Kaitlyn filled me in."

"She doesn't know the whole story. Nobody does. I didn't take a corner too fast: one of the *Ghûl* ran in front of me."

"The what? 'Hule'?"

"*Ghûl*. What you saw in that lot the other night."

"Is that the breed?"

Chris laughed. "Yes, that's the breed, all right. It was up towards Saratoga, on Route 9. I was heading home from band practice. It was late, and it was a New Moon, so it was especially dark. The next thing I knew, there was this animal in the road. My first thought was, *It's a wolf.* Then I thought, *That's ridiculous: there are no wolves around here. It must be a coyote.* But I had already seen this wasn't a coyote, either. Whatever it was, it looked awful, so thin it must be starving. I leaned to the left, to veer around it, and it moved in front of me. I tried to tilt the bike the other way, overcompensated, and put it down, hard."

In the distance, the enormous statue of Nipper, the RCA mascot, that crowned one of the buildings closer to the river cocked its head attentively.

"The accident itself, I don't remember. That's a blank. What I do remember is coming to in all kinds of pain and feeling something tugging on my

sleeve. My sleeve—I'm sure you heard I wasn't wearing a helmet. I couldn't really see out of my left eye, but with my right, I saw the animal I'd tried to avoid with my right arm in its mouth. My legs were tangled up with the bike, which was a good thing, because this creature was trying to drag me off the road. If it hadn't been for the added weight, it would have succeeded. This wasn't any Lassie rescue, either: the look on its face—it was ravenous. It was going to kill and eat me, and not necessarily in that order.

"Every time the animal yanked my arm, bones ground together throughout my body. White lights burst in front of my eyes. I cried out, although my jaw was broken, which made it more of a moan. I tried to use my left arm to hit the creature, but I'd dislocated that shoulder. Its eyes—those same reversed eyes you looked into—regarded me the way you or I would a slice of prime rib. I've never been in as much pain as I was lying there; I've also never been as frightened as I was with that animal's teeth beginning to tear through the sleeve of my leather jacket and into the skin beneath. The worst of it was, the creature made absolutely no sound, no growl, nothing."

We passed beneath the Thruway, momentarily surrounded by the whine of tires on pavement.

"Talk about dumb luck, or Divine Providence: just as my legs are starting to ease out from the bike, an eighteen-wheeler rounds the corner. How the driver didn't roll right over me and the animal gripping my arm, I chalk up to his caffeine-enhanced reflexes. I thought that, if I were going to die, at least it wouldn't be as something's dinner. As it was, the truck's front bumper slowed to a stop right over my head. Had it been any other vehicle, my would-be consumer might have stood its ground. The truck, though, was too much for it, and it disappeared.

"When the doctors and cops—not to mention my mother—finally got around to asking me to relate the accident in as much detail as I could, none of them could credit a creature that wasn't a coyote that wasn't a wolf, which caused my crash and then tried to drag me away. I'd suffered severe head trauma, been comatose for five days—that must be where the story had come from. The wounds on my forearm were another result of the accident. Apparently, no one bothered to ask the truck driver what he'd seen.

“For a long time after that night, I wasn’t in such great shape. Between the seizures and the different medications for the seizures, I spent weeks at a time in a kind of fog. Some of the meds made me want to sleep; some ruined my concentration; one made everything incredibly funny. But no matter what state I was in, no matter how strange or distant my surroundings seemed, I knew that that animal—that what it had done, what it had tried to do to me—was real.”

To the left, the beige box of Albany Memorial Hospital slid by. I said, “Okay, I get that there’s a connection between the thing that caused your accident and the one I ran into the other night. And I’m guessing this Keeper guy is involved, too. Maybe you could hurry up and get to the point?”

“I’m trying. Did you know that State Street used to be the site of one of the largest cemeteries in Albany?”

“No.”

“Till almost the middle of the nineteenth century, when the bodies were relocated and the workers found the first tunnels.”

“Tunnels?”

“Left again up here. Not too much farther.”

To either side of us, trees jostled the shoulder. They opened briefly on the left to a lawn running up to shabby red brick apartments, then closed ranks again.

“So why are these tunnels so important?”

“That concrete slab in the basement, the one that’s locked down? What if I told you that opens on a tunnel?”

“I’d still want to know what this has to do with where Kaitlyn is.”

“Because she… when we… all right.” He took a deep breath. “Even before my doctor found the right combination of anti-seizure meds, I was doing research. I probably know the name of every librarian between Albany and Saratoga. I’ve talked to anyone who knows anything about local history. I’ve spent weeks in the archives of the State Museum, the Albany Institute, and three private collections. I’ve filled four boxes worth of notebooks.”

“And?”

“I’ve recognized connections no one’s noticed before. There’s an entire—you could call it a secret history, or shadow history, of this entire region, stretching back—you wouldn’t believe me if I told you how far. I learned things…”

“What things?”

“It doesn’t matter. What does is that, somehow, they found out about me.”

“The Keeper and his friends.”

“At first, I was sure they were coming for me. I put my affairs in order, had a long conversation with my mom that scared her half to death. Then, when they didn’t arrive, I started to think that I might be safe, even that I might have been mistaken about them knowing about me.”

“But you weren’t. Not only were they aware of you, they were watching you, following you. They saw you with Kaitlyn. They figured…”

“Yeah.”

My heart was pounding in my ears. A torrent of obscenities and reproaches threatened to pour out of my mouth. I choked them down, said, “Shouldn’t we go to the cops? If you’ve gathered as much material on this Keeper as you say you have—”

“It’s not like that. The cops wouldn’t—if they did believe me, it wouldn’t help Kaitlyn.”

“I can’t see why not. If this guy’s holding Kaitlyn, a bunch of cops outside his front door should make him reconsider.”

We had arrived at a T-junction. “Left or right?”

“Straight.”

“Straight?” I squinted across the road in front of us, to a pair of brick columns that flanked the entrance to a narrow road. A plaque on the column to the right read ALBANY RURAL CEMETERY. I turned to Chris. “What the fuck?”

He withdrew his right hand from the bag on his lap, his fingers curled around the grip of a large automatic handgun whose muzzle he swung toward me. “Once this truck passes, we’re going over there.” He nodded at the brick columns.

The anger that had been foaming in my chest fell away to a trickle. I turned my gaze to the broad road in front of me, watched a moving van labor up it. The gun weighted the corner of my vision. I wanted to speak, to demand of Chris what the fuck he thought he was doing, but my tongue was dead in my mouth. Besides, I knew what he was doing. Once the van was out of sight, Chris waved the gun and I drove across into the cemetery.

Even in the dark, where I could only see what little my headlights brought to view, I was aware that the place was big, much bigger than any graveyard I'd been in back home. On both sides of the road, monuments raised themselves like the ruins of some lost civilization obsessed with its end. A quartet of Doric columns supporting a single beam gave way to a copper-green angel with arms and wings outstretched, which yielded to a gray Roman temple in miniature, which was replaced by a marble woman clutching a marble cross. Between the larger memorials, an assortment of headstones stood as if marking the routes of old streets. A few puddles spread among them. Tall trees, their branches bare with the season, loomed beside the road.

As we made our way further into the cemetery, Chris resumed talking. But the gun drew his words into the black circle of its mouth, allowing only random snippets to escape. At some point, he said, "Old Francis was the one who finally put it all together for me. He'd found an Annex to the Kennel during a day-job digging graves. A pair of them came for him that night, and if there hadn't been a couple of decent-sized rocks to hand, they would have had him. But he'd played the Minor Leagues years before, and his right arm remembered how to throw. Even so, he hopped a freight going west and stayed out there for a long time." At another point he said, "You have no idea. When the first hunters crossed the land bridge to America, the *Ghûl* trailed them." At still another moment he said, "Something they do to the meat." That Chris had not dismounted his hobby-horse was clear.

All I could think about was what was going to happen to me once he told me to stop the car. He wouldn't shoot me in it—that would leave too much evidence. Better to walk me someplace else, dispose of me, and ditch the car over in Troy. He didn't want to leave me out in the open, though. Maybe an open grave, shovel in enough dirt to conceal the body? Too dicey: a strong rain could expose his handiwork. One of the mausoleums we passed?

Much more likely, especially if you knew the family no longer used it. When he said, “All right: we’re here,” in front of an elaborate marble porch set into a low hill, I felt an odd surge of satisfaction.

I had the idea this might be my time to act, but Chris had me turn off the engine, leaving on the headlights, and hand him the keys. He exited the car and circled around the front to my side, the automatic pointed at me throughout. Standing far enough away that I couldn’t slam my door against him, he urged me out of the car. I wanted—at least, I contemplated refusing him, declaring that if he were going to shoot me, he would have to do it here, I wasn’t going to make this any easier for him. I could hear myself defiant, but his shouted, “Now!” brought me out in front of him without a word.

“Over there,” he said, pointing the gun at the mausoleum. “It should be open.”

That sentence, everything it implied, revived my voice. “Is this where you took Kaitlyn?” I said as I walked toward the door.

“What?”

“I’ve been trying to figure out how you did it. Did you meet her at the club and whisk her out here? What—did you have a cab waiting? A rental? I can’t quite work out the timing of it. Maybe you brought her somewhere else first? Some place to hold her until you could take her here?”

“You haven’t heard a single thing I’ve been saying, have you?”

“Were you afraid I’d discover it was you? Or was this always your plan, kill the girl you couldn’t have and the guy she wouldn’t leave?”

“You asshole,” Chris said. “I’m doing this for Kaitlyn.”

That Kaitlyn might be unharmed, might be in league with Chris, was a possibility I had excluded the second it had occurred to me as I drove into the cemetery, and that I had kept from consideration as we’d wound deeper into its grounds. There would be no reason for her to resort to such an extreme measure; if she wanted to be with Chris, she could be with him. She already had. All the same, his statement was a punch in the gut; my words quavered as I said, “Sure—you tell yourself that.”

“Shut up.”

“Or what—you’ll shoot me?”

“Just open the door.”

The mausoleum’s entrance was a tall stone rectangle set back between a quartet of pillars that supported a foreshortened portico. One the front of the portico, the name UPTON was bordered by dogs capering on their hind legs. Behind me, there was a click, and a wide circle of light centered on the door. There was no latch that I could see. I put out my right hand and pushed the cold stone. The door swung in easily, spilling the beam of Chris’s flashlight inside. The heavy odor of soil packed with clay rode the yellow light out to us. I glanced over my shoulder, but Chris had been reduced to a blinding glare. His voice said, “Go in.”

Inside, the mausoleum was considerably smaller than the grandiosity of its exterior would have led you to expect. A pair of stone vaults occupied most of the floor, only a narrow aisle between them. The flashlight roamed over the vaults; according to the lids, Beloved Husband and Father Howard rested to my left, while Devoted Wife and Mother Caitlin took her repose on the right. (The woman’s name registered immediately.) Under each name, a relief showed a nude woman reclining on her left side, curled around by a brood of young dogs, a pair of which nursed at her breasts. Beyond the stone cases, the mausoleum was a wall of black. The air seemed slightly warmer than it was outside.

With a clatter, the light tilted up to the ceiling. Chris said, “I put the flashlight on the end of the vault to your left. I want you to take two steps backwards—slowly—reach out, and pick it up.” I nodded. “And if you try to blind me with the light, I’ll shoot.”

When I was holding the bulky flashlight, I directed its beam at the back of the mausoleum. A rounded doorway opened in the center of a wall on which the head of an enormous dog had been painted in colors dulled by dust and time. Eyes whose white pupils and black sclerae were the size of serving plates glared down at us. The dog’s mouth was wide, the door positioned at the top of its throat. A click, and a second light joined mine. “In there,” Chris said.

“I was wondering where you were going to do it.”

“Shut up.”

I stepped through the doorway into a wide, dark space. I swept the light around, saw packed dirt above, below, to either side, darkness ahead. There was easily enough room for me and Chris and a few more besides, though the gray sides appeared to close in in the distance. The air was warmer still, the earth smell cloying. Chris's light traced the contours of the walls, their arch into the ceiling. It appeared we were at one end of a sizable tunnel.
"All right," Chris said.

"Where's Kaitlyn?"

"Shut up."

"Aren't you going to let me see her?"

"Shut up."

"Oh, I get it. This is supposed to be the icing on the cake, isn't it? You bring me to the place you killed my girlfriend, but you shoot me without allowing me to see her."

I turned into the glare of Chris's flashlight, which jerked up to my eyes. I didn't care. Tears streaming down my cheeks, I said, "Jesus Christ: what kind of a sick fuck are you?"

Chris stepped forward, his arm extended, and pressed the automatic against my chest. My eyes dazzled, I couldn't see so much as feel the solid steel pushing against my sternum. The odor of soil and clay was interrupted by that of grease and metal, of the eight inches of gun ready to bridge me out of this life. Between clenched teeth, Chris said, "You really are a stupid shit."

"Fuck you."

The pressure on my chest eased, and I thought, *This is it. He's going to shoot me in the head.* My mouth filled with the taste of, not so much regret as sour pique that this was the manner in which my life had reached its conclusion, beneath the surface of the city of my disappointment, murdered by the broken psychotic who'd spoiled my relationship and fractured what should have been the start of my new life. *It's only a moment,* I thought, *then you'll be with Kaitlyn.* But I didn't believe that. I would be dead, part of the blackness, and that was the most I had to look forward to.

"Here you are."

Not for an instant did I mistake this voice for Chris's. It wasn't only that it was behind me—the instrument itself was unlike any I'd heard, rich and cold, as if the lower depths of the tunnel in whose mouth we stood had been given speech. Ignoring Chris, I spun, my light revealing him, the white man with the shaggy black hair and seamed face who'd held me with his strange eyes in QE2, the man Chris had dubbed the Keeper. He'd exchanged his black leather jacket for a black trenchcoat in whose pockets his hands rested. Chris's flashlight found that long face, deepened the shadows in its creases. The man did not blink.

Chris said, "You know why I've come."

"Yes?"

"I'm here to offer a trade."

"What do you offer?"

"Him."

"What?" I looked over my shoulder. Chris still held the automatic pointed at me.

"Shut up."

"You're going to trade me for Kaitlyn?"

"Shut up."

"So whatever this guy and his friends—you think—this is your solution?"

"Shut up."

"Jesus! You're even worse than I thought."

"This'll be the best thing you've ever done," Chris said. "I've lived with you long enough to know. It's the best thing you could ever do for her."

I opened my mouth to answer, but the Keeper coughed, and our attentions returned to him. He said, "For?"

"The woman you took six days past."

"A woman?"

"Damn you!" Chris shouted. "You know who I'm talking about, so can we cut the coy routine? In the names of Circë, Cybele, and Atys, in the name of

Diana, Mother of Hounds, I offer this man's life for that of the woman you took and hold."

"Let us ask the Hounds," the man said. From the darkness behind him, a trio of the same creatures I'd crossed a vacant lot to help on a rainy night emerged into the glow of our flashlights and slunk toward me. Big as that thing had been, these were bigger, the first and largest as tall at the shoulder as my chin, its companions level with my heart. Each was as skeletally thin as that first one, each patched with the same pale fur. At the sight of them, my mind tilted, all my mental furniture sliding to one side. Everything Chris had said in the past hour tumbled together. Inclining their heads in my direction, the Hounds walked lazily around me, silent except for the scrape of their claws on the tunnel floor. Their white skin slid against their bones, and I thought that I had never seen creatures so frail and so deadly. The leader kept its considerable jaws closed, but its companions left theirs open, one exposing its fangs in a kind of sneer, the other licking its lips with a liver-colored tongue. Their combined reek, dirt underscored with decay, as if they'd been rolling in the remains of the cemetery's more recent residents, threatened to gag me. I concentrated on breathing through my mouth and remaining calm, on not being afraid, or not that afraid, on not noticing the stains on the things' teeth, on not wondering whether they'd go for my throat or my arms first, on not permitting the panic that was desperate to send me screaming from this place as fast as my legs would carry me from crossing the boundary from emotion to action. The trio completed their circuit of me and returned to the Keeper, assuming positions around him.

"The Hounds are unimpressed."

I could have fainted with relief.

"What do you mean?" Chris said. "In what way is this not a fair trade?"

"The Hounds have their reasons."

"This is bullshit!"

"Do you offer anything else?"

"What I've offered is enough."

The man shrugged, turning away.

“Wait!” Chris said. “There are boxes—in my room, there are four boxes full of the information I’ve collected about you. Return the woman, and they’re yours, all of them.”

The man hesitated, as if weighing Chris’s proposal. Then, “No,” he said, and began to walk back down the tunnel, the things accompanying him.

“Wait!” Chris said. “Stop!”

The man ignored him. Already, he and his companions were at the edge of the flashlight’s reach.

“Me!” Chris shouted. “Goddamn you, I offer myself! Is that acceptable to the Hounds?”

The four figures halted. The Keeper said, “Freely made?”

“Yes,” Chris said. “A life for a life.”

“A life for a life.” The man’s face, as he revolved toward us, was ghastly with pleasure. “Acceptable.”

“What a surprise.”

“Leave the light—and the weapon.”

Chris’s flashlight clicked off. The clatter of it hitting the floor was followed by the thud of the automatic. His shoes scuffed the floor and he was stepping past me. He stopped and looked at me, his eyes wild with what lay ahead. He said, “Aren’t you going to stop me? Aren’t you going to insist you be the one they take for Kaitlyn?”

“No.”

He almost smiled. “You never deserved her.”

I had no answer for that.

When he was even with them, the Hounds surrounded him. From the tensity of their postures, the curl of their lips from their teeth, I half expected them to savage him right there. The straightening of Chris’s posture said he was anticipating something similar. The Keeper bent his head toward Chris. “It’s what you really wanted,” he said, nodding at the blackness. One of the smaller things nudged him forward with its head, and the four of them faded down into the dark. For a time, the shuffle of Chris’s

feet, the scrape of the things' claws, told their progress, then those sounds faded to silence.

His gaze directed after Chris, the Keeper said, "Leave. What's left of him won't be too happy to learn the life he's bartered for was yours."

I didn't argue, didn't ask *What about Kaitlyn?* I obeyed the man's command and fled that place without another word. In my headlong rush through the mausoleum proper, I ran my left hip into the corner of Howard Upton's vault so hard I gasped and stumbled against his wife's, but although the pain threatened to steal my breath, the image of what might be stepping into the mausoleum after me propelled me forward, out the still-open entrance.

My car was where we'd left it, its headlights undimmed. I fumbled for my wallet and the spare key I kept in the pocket behind my license. As I lowered myself into the driver's seat, my hip screaming in protest, I kept checking the door to the mausoleum, which remained ajar and in which I continued to think I saw shadowy forms about to emerge. The car started immediately, and in my haste to escape the way I'd come I backed into a tall tombstone, which cracked at the base and toppled backwards. I didn't care; I shifted into first and sped out of the cemetery, stealing glances in the rearview mirror all the way to my apartment.

5

Despite the bruise on my hip, the increased pain and difficulty moving that sent me to the emergency room the next day with a story about colliding with a doorstep, to learn after an X-ray that I had chipped the bone, I half expected Chris to walk in the front door as usual the following night. It wasn't that I doubted what had happened—I was in too much discomfort—it was more that I couldn't believe its finality. Not until another week had passed, and the landlord appeared wanting to know where Chris and his rent were (to which I replied that I hadn't seen him for days), did the fact of his… I didn't have the word for it: his sacrifice? his abduction? his departure? Call it what you would, only when I was standing at the open door to his room, which was Spartan as a monk's cell, watching the

landlord riffle through Chris's desk, did the permanence of his fate settle on me.

The week after that brought a concerned call from Kaitlyn's parents, asking if I'd seen their daughter (to which I replied that I hadn't had any contact with her for weeks). This began a chain of events whose next link was her father driving to Albany to ask a number of people, including me, the last time they'd seen Kaitlyn. Within a couple of days, the police were involved. They interviewed me twice, the first time in a reasonably friendly way, when I was no more than the concerned boyfriend, the second time in a more confrontational and extended session, occasioned by the detective's putting together my disclosure that Kaitlyn and Chris had been briefly involved with the fact that both of those people had gone missing in reasonably close proximity to each other. There wasn't any substantial evidence against me, but I had no doubt Detective Calasso was certain I knew more than I was saying. Kaitlyn's mother shared his suspicion, and during a long phone call before Christmas she attempted to convince me to tell her what I knew. I insisted that, sorry as I was to have to say it, I didn't know what had happened to Kaitlyn. I supposed this was literally true.

Not that I hadn't dwelt on the matter each and every day since I'd awakened fully dressed on my futon, my hip pounding, a trail of muddy footprints showing my path from the front door to the refrigerator, the top of which served as a nominal liquor cabinet, to my room, where the bottle of Johnny Walker Black that had plunged me into unconsciousness leaned against my pillows. That Kaitlyn should be at the far end of that dark tunnel, surrounded by those things, the Hounds, the *Ghûl*, was unbelievable, impossible. Yet a second stop at her apartment failed to reveal any change from my previous visit. I sat on the edge of her bed, the lights out, my head fuzzy from the painkiller I'd taken for my hip, and struggled to invent alternative scenarios to the one Chris had narrated. Kaitlyn had met another guy—she was in the midst of an extended fling, a romantic adventure that had carried her out of Albany to Cancun, or Bermuda. She'd suffered a breakdown and had herself committed. She'd undergone a spiritual awakening and joined a convent. But try as I did to embrace them, each invention sounded more unreal than the last, no more than another opiate-facilitated fantasy.

I weighed going after her, myself, returning to the mausoleum suitably armed and equipped and braving the tunnel to retrieve her. I even went so far as to browse a gun store on Route 9, only to discover that the weapons I judged necessary if I were to stand any kind of chance—a shotgun, a minimum of three pistols, boxes of ammunition for each—cost vastly more than my bookstore salary would allow. Trying to buy guns on the street was not a realistic option: I had no idea where to go, how to open any such transaction. On a couple of occasions I found myself driving north through the city, retracing the path Chris and I had followed to the cemetery. When I realized what I was doing, I turned onto the nearest side street and headed back toward my apartment. Some nights I unlocked the deadbolts on the basement door and descended the stairs to stand staring down at the cement circle sunk in the floor. The chains securing the bar across it looked rusted right through; with a little effort, I ought to be able to break them, heave the cover up, and… I made sure to lock the basement door behind me.

On the morning of February 2, 1993, as the sun was casting its light across the apartment's front window, I stuffed every piece of clothing I owned, all my toiletries, whatever food was in the cupboards over the sink, into a green duffel bag that I struggled out the front door, down the front steps, and through my Hyundai's hatchback. The apartment's door was wide open, the place full of my possessions, but I started the engine, threw the car into gear, and fled Albany. I didn't return home to my parents; I didn't head north or west, either. I wanted the shore, the sea, someplace where the earth was not so deep, so I sped east, along I-90, toward what I thought would be the safety of Cape Cod. I didn't stop for bathroom breaks; I didn't stop until Albany was a ghost in my rearview mirror and the Atlantic a grey sheet spread in front of me.

All the way to Provincetown, while I pressed the gas pedal as near the floor as I could and maintain control of the car, I kept the radio at full volume, tuned to whatever hard rock station broadcast the clearest. *Highway to Hell* bled into *Paranoid* became *Lock Up the Wolves*. Although the doors, the dash, thrummed with a bass line that changed only slightly from song to song, and my ears protested another shrieking singer, guitar, none of it was enough to drown out the sound that had drawn me from my bed the previous night and rushed me to the basement door, hands shaking as I

unsnapped the deadbolts and turned the doorknob. Some kind of loud noise, a crash, and then Kaitlyn—I had heard her voice echoing below me, calling my name in that low, sing-song tone she used when she wanted to have sex. I had thought I was in a dream, but her words had led me up out of sleep, until the realization that I was awake and still hearing her had sent me from my room, kicking over several stacks of books on the way. The door open, I switched on the light and saw, at the foot of the stairs, shielding her eyes against the sudden brightness, Kaitlyn, returned to me at last.

At the sight of her there—the emotion that transfixed me was some variety of *I knew it.* I knew she hadn't really vanished, knew she wasn't lost under the earth. She was wearing the oversized army greatcoat, which was streaked with mud. Her feet were bare and filthy. Her skin was more than pale, as if her time underground had bleached it. Her hair was tangled, clotted with dirt, her mouth flaked with something brown.

I was on the verge of running down the stairs to her when she lowered her hand from her eyes and I saw the white centers, the black sclerae. A wave of dizziness threatened to topple me headlong down the stairs. Kaitlyn smiled at my hesitation, reached over, and pulled open her coat. Underneath, she was naked, her white, white flesh smeared with dirt and clay. She called to me again. "Here I aaa-mmm," she half sang. "Didn't you miss me? Don't you wanna come play with me?"

A bolt of longing, of desire sudden and intense, pierced me. God help me, I did want her. My Eurydice: I wanted to bury myself in her, and who cared if her eyes were changed, if her flesh bore evidence of activities I did not want to dwell on? I might have—might have crossed the dozen pieces of wood that separated the life to which I clung from that which had forced itself on me, surrender myself to sweet oblivion, had a large, bony shape not stumbled into view behind Kaitlyn. Of the *Ghûl* I had seen previously, none had given so profound an impression of being unaccustomed to walking on all fours. It held its head up too high, as if unused to the position. Its weird eyes were rheumy, its gums raw where its lips drew back from them. It curled around Kaitlyn from behind, dragging its muzzle across her hip before nuzzling between her thighs. She sighed deeply. Eyes lidded, lips parted, she extended her hand toward me while the other pressed the *Ghûl*'s head forward.

The thing pulled away long enough to give me a sidelong glance, and it was that gesture that sent me scrambling backwards, grabbing for the door and slamming it shut, throwing myself against it as I snapped the deadbolts. It kept me there while I listened to the stairs creak under the combined weights of Kaitlyn and her companion, who settled themselves on the opposite side of the door so that she could murmur tender obscenities to me while the *Ghûl'*s claws worried the wood. They left with the dawn. Once I was sure they were gone, I ran into my room and began frantically packing.

If the far end of Cape Cod was not as secure a redoubt as I might have thought, hoped, if Martha's Vineyard and Nantucket proved no more isolated, they were preferable to Albany, whose single, outsized skyscraper was an enormous cenotaph marking a necropolis of whose true depths its inhabitants remained unaware. I fled them, over the miles of road and ocean; I am still fleeing them, down the long passage that joins *now* to *then.* That flight has defined my life, is its individual failure and the larger failures of the age in sum. I see the two of them still, down there in the dark, where their wanderings take them along sewers, up into the basements of houses full of sleeping families, under roads and rivers, to familiar cemeteries. Kaitlyn has grown more lean, her hair long. She has traded in her old greatcoat for a newer trenchcoat. The *Ghûl* lopes along beside her, nimble on its feet. It too has become more lean. The scar over its left eye remains.

The Shallows

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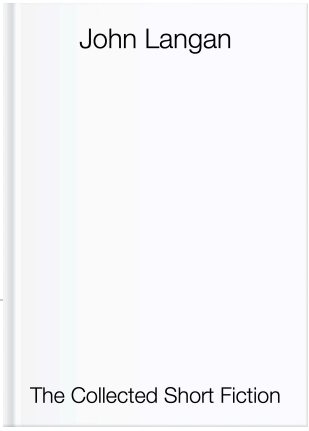

"Il faut cultiver notre jardin."—Voltaire, *Candide*

"I could call you Gus," Ransom said.

The crab's legs, blue and cream, clattered against one another. It did not hoist itself from its place in the sink, though, which meant it was listening to him. Maybe. Staring out the dining room window, his daily mug of instant coffee steaming on the table in front of him, he said, "That was supposed to be my son's name. Augustus. It was his great-grandfather's name, his mother's father's father. The old man was dying while Heather was pregnant. We… I, really, was struck by the symmetry: one life ending, another beginning. It seemed a duty, our duty, to make sure the name wasn't lost, to carry it forward into a new generation. I didn't know old Gus, not really; as far as I can remember, I met him exactly once, at a party at Heather's parents' a couple of years before we were married."

The great curtain of pale light that rippled thirty yards from his house stilled. Although he had long since given up trying to work out the pattern of its changes, Ransom glanced at his watch. 2:02 P.M., he was reasonably sure. The vast rectangle that occupied the space where his neighbor's green-sided house had stood, as well as everything to either side of it, dimmed, then filled with the rich blue of the tropical ocean, the paler blue of the tropical sky. Waves chased one another toward Ransom, their long swells broken by the backs of fish, sharks, whales, all rushing in the same direction as the waves, away from a spot where the surface of the ocean heaved in a way that reminded Ransom of a pot of water approaching the boil.

(Tilting his head back, Matt had said, *How far up do you think it goes? I don't know,* Ransom had answered. Twenty feet in front of them, the sheet of light that had descended an hour before, draping their view of the

Pattersons' house and everything beyond it, belled, as if swept by a breeze. *This is connected to what's been happening at the poles, isn't it?* Matt had squinted to see through the dull glare. *I don't know,* Ransom had said, *maybe. Do you think the Pattersons are okay?* Matt had asked. *I hope so,* Ransom had said. He'd doubted it.)

He looked at the clumps of creamer speckling the surface of the coffee, miniature icebergs. "Gus couldn't have been that old. He'd married young, and Heather's father, Rudy, had married young, and Heather was twenty-four or -five… call him sixty-five, sixty-six, tops. To look at him, though, you would have placed him a good ten, fifteen years closer to the grave. Old… granted, I was younger, then, and from a distance of four decades, mid-sixty seemed a lot older than it does twenty years on. But even factoring in the callowness of youth, Gus was not in good shape. I doubt he'd ever been what you'd consider tall, but he was stooped, as if his head were being drawn down into his chest. Thin, frail: although the day was hot, he wore a long-sleeved checked shirt buttoned to the throat and a pair of navy chinos. His head… his hair was thinning, but what there was of it was long, and it floated around his head like the crest of some ancient bird. His nose supported a pair of horn-rimmed glasses whose lenses were white with scratches; I couldn't understand how he could see through them, or maybe that was the point. Whether he was eating from the paper plate Heather's uncle brought him or just sitting there, old Gus's lips kept moving, his tongue edging out and retreating."

The coffee was cool enough to drink. Over the rim of the mug, he watched the entire ocean churning with such force that whatever of its inhabitants had not reached safety were flung against one another. Mixed among their flailing forms were parts of creatures Ransom could not identify, a forest of black needles, a mass of rubbery pink tubes, the crested dome of what might have been a head the size of a bus.

He lowered the mug. "By the time I parked my car, Gus was seated near the garage. Heather took me by the hand and led me over to him. Those white lenses raised in my direction as she crouched beside his chair and introduced me as her boyfriend. Gus extended his right hand, which I took in mine. Hard… his palm, the undersides of his fingers, were rough with calluses, the yield of a lifetime as a mechanic. I tried to hold his hand

gently… politely, I guess, but although his arm trembled, there was plenty of strength left in his fingers, which closed on mine like a trap springing shut. He said something, *Pleased to meet you, you've got a special girl, here,* words to that effect. I wasn't paying attention; I was busy with the vice tightening around my fingers, with my bones grinding against one another. Once he'd delivered his pleasantries, Gus held onto my hand a moment longer, then the lenses dropped, the fingers relaxed, and my hand was my own again. Heather kissed him on the cheek, and we went to have a look at the food. My fingers ached on and off for the rest of the day."

At the center of the heaving ocean, something forced its way up through the waves. The peak of an undersea mountain, rising to the sun: that was still Ransom's first impression. Niagaras poured off black rock. His mind struggled to catch up with what stood revealed, to find suitable comparisons for it, even as more of it pushed the water aside. Some kind of structure—structures: domes, columns, walls—a city, an Atlantis finding the sun, again. No—the shapes were off: the domes bulged, the columns bent, the walls curved, in ways that conformed to no architectural style—that made no sense. A natural formation, then, a quirk of geology. No—already, the hypothesis was untenable: there was too much evidence of intentionality in the shapes draped with seaweed, heaped with fish brought suffocating into the air. As the rest of the island left the ocean, filling the view before Ransom to the point it threatened to burst out of the curtain, the appearance of an enormous monolith in the foreground, its surface incised with pictographs, settled the matter. This huge jumble of forms, some of which appeared to contradict one another, to intersect in ways the eye could not untangle, to occupy almost the same space at the same time, was deliberate.

Ransom slid his chair back from the table and stood. The crab's legs dinged on the stainless steel sink. Picking up his mug, he turned away from the window. "That was the extent of my interactions with Gus. To be honest, what I knew of him, what Heather had told me, I didn't much care for. He was what I guess you'd call a functioning alcoholic, although the way he functioned… he was a whiskey-drinker, Jack Daniel's, Jim Bean, Maker's Mark, that end of the shelf. I can't claim a lot of experience, but from what I've seen, sour mash shortcuts to your mean, your nasty side. That was the case with Gus, at least. It wasn't so much that he used his hands—he did,

and I gather the hearing in Rudy's left ear was the worse for it—no, the whiskey unlocked the cage that held all of Gus's resentment, his bitterness, his jealousy. Apparently, when he was younger, Rudy's little brother, Jan, had liked helping their mother in the kitchen. He'd been something of a baker, Jan; Rudy claimed he made the best chocolate cake you ever tasted, frosted it with buttercream. His mother used to let him out of working with his father in the garage or around the yard so he could assist her with the meals. None of the other kids—there were six of them—was too thrilled at there being one less of them to dilute their father's attention, especially when they saw Gus's lips tighten as he realized Jan had stayed inside again.

"Anyway, this one night, Gus wandered into the house after spending the better part of the evening in the garage. He passed most of the hours after he returned from work fixing his friends' and acquaintances' cars, Hank Williams on the transistor radio, Jack Daniel's in one of the kids' juice glasses. In he comes, wiping the grease off his hands with a dishtowel, and what should greet his eyes when he peers into the refrigerator in search of a little supper but the golden top of the cherry pie Jan made for the church bake sale the next day? Gus loves cherry pie. Without a second thought, he lifts the pie from the top shelf of the fridge and deposits it on the kitchen table. He digs his clasp-knife out of his pants pocket, opens it, and cuts himself a generous slice. He doesn't bother with a fork; instead, he shoves his fingers under the crust and lifts the piece straight to his mouth. It's so tasty, he helps himself to a second, larger serving before he's finished the first. In his eagerness, he slices through the pie tin to the table. He doesn't care; he leaves the knife stuck where it is and uses his other hand to free the piece.

"That's how Jan finds him when he walks into the kitchen for a glass of milk, a wedge of cherry pie in one hand, red syrup and yellow crumbs smeared on his other hand, his mouth and chin. By this age—Jan's around twelve, thirteen—the boy has long since learned that the safest way, the only way, to meet the outrages that accompany his father's drinking is calmly, impassively. Give him the excuse to garnish his injury with insult, and he'll take it.

"And yet, this is exactly what Jan does. He can't help himself, maybe. He lets his response to the sight of Gus standing with his mouth stuffed with

half-chewed pie flash across his face. It's all the provocation his father requires. *What?* he says, crumbs spraying from his mouth.

"*Nothing*, Jan says, but he's too late. Gus drops the slice he's holding to the floor, scoops the rest of the pie from the tin with his free hand, and slaps that to the floor as well. He raises one foot and stamps on the mess he's made, spreading it across the linoleum. Jan knows enough to remain where he is. Gus brings his shoe down on the ruin of Jan's efforts twice more, then wipes his hands on his pants, frees his knife from the table, and folds it closed. As he returns it to his pocket, he tells Jan that if he wants to be a little faggot and wear an apron in the kitchen, that's his concern, but he'd best keep his little faggot mouth shut when there's a man around, particularly when that man's his father. Does Jan understand him?

"*Yes, pa*, Jan says.

"*Then take your little faggot ass off to bed,* Gus says.

"What happened next," Ransom said, "wasn't a surprise; in fact, it was depressingly predictable." He walked into the kitchen, deposited his mug on the counter. "That was the end of Jan's time in the kitchen. He wasn't the first one outside to help his father, but he wasn't the last, either, and he worked hard. The morning of his eighteenth birthday, he enlisted in the Marines; within a couple of months he was on patrol in Vietnam. He was cited for bravery on several occasions; I think he may have been awarded a medal. One afternoon, when his squad stopped for a rest, he was shot through the head by a sniper. He'd removed his helmet… to tell the truth, I'm not sure why he had his helmet off. He survived, but it goes without saying, he was never the same. His problems… he had trouble moving, coordinating his arms and legs. His speech was slurred; he couldn't remember the names of familiar objects, activities; he forgot something the second after you said it to him. There was no way he could live on his own. His mother wanted Jan to move back home, but Gus refused, said there was no way he was going to be saddled with an idiot who hadn't known enough to keep his damn helmet on. Which didn't stop him from accepting the drinks he was bought when Jan visited and Gus paraded him at the V.F.W."

Behind him, a pair of doors would be opening on the front of a squat stone box near the island's peak. The structure, whose rough exterior suggested a

child's drawing of a Greek temple, must be the size of a cathedral, yet it was dwarfed by what squeezed out of its open doors. While Ransom continued to have trouble with the sheer size of the thing, which seemed as if it must break a textbook's worth of physical laws, he was more bothered by its speed. There should have been no way, he was certain, for something of that mass to move that quickly. Given the thing's appearance, the tumult of coils wreathing its head, the scales shimmering on its arms, its legs, the wings that unfolded into great translucent fans whose edges were not quite in focus, its speed was hardly the most obvious detail on which to focus, but for Ransom, the dearth of time between the first hint of the thing's shadow on the doors and its heaving off the ground on a hurricane-blast of its wings confirmed the extent to which the world had changed.

(*What was that?* Matt had screamed, his eyes wide. *Was that real? Is that happening?* Ransom had been unable to speak, his tongue dead in his mouth.)

Like so many cranes raising and lowering, the cluster of smaller limbs that rose from the center of the crab's back was opening and closing. Ransom said, "I know: if the guy was such a shit, why pass his name on to my son?" He shrugged. "When I was younger—at that point in my life, the idea of the past… of a family's past, of continuity between the present and that past, was very important to me. By the time Heather was pregnant, the worst of Gus's offenses was years gone by. If you wanted, I suppose you could say that he was paying for his previous excesses. He hadn't taken notice of his diabetes for decades. If the toes on his right foot hadn't turned black, then started to smell, I doubt he ever would have returned to the doctor. Although… what that visit brought him was the emergency amputation of his toes, followed by the removal of his foot a couple of weeks later. The surgeon wanted to take his leg, said the only way to beat the gangrene that was eating Gus was to leap ahead of it. Gus refused, declared he could see where he was headed, and he wasn't going to be jointed like a chicken on the way. There was no arguing with him. His regular doctor prescribed some heavy-duty antibiotics for him, but I'm not sure he had the script filled.

"When he returned home, everyone said it was to die—which it was, of course, but I think we all expected him to be gone in a matter of days. He

hung on, though, for one week, and the next, and the one after that. Heather and her mother visited him. I was at work. She said the house smelled like spoiled meat; it was so bad, she couldn't stay in for more than a couple of minutes, barely long enough to stand beside Gus's bed and kiss his cheek. His lips moved, but she couldn't understand him. She spent the rest of the visit outside, in her mother's truck, listening to the radio."

Ransom glanced out the window. The huge sheet of light rippled like an aurora, the image of the island and its cargo gone. He said, "Gus died the week after Heather's visit. To tell the truth, I half expected him to last until the baby arrived. Heather went to the wake and the funeral; I had to work. As it turned out, we settled on Matthew—Matt, instead."

His break was over. Ransom exited the kitchen, turned down the hallway to the front door. On the walls to either side of him, photos of himself and his family, his son, smiled at photographers' prompts years forgotten. He peered out one of the narrow windows that flanked the door. The rocking chair he'd left on the front porch in a quixotic gesture stood motionless. Across the street, the charred mound that sat inside the burned-out remains of his neighbor's house appeared quiet. Ransom reached for the six-foot pole that leaned against the corner opposite him. Careful to check that the butcher knife duct-taped to the top was secure, he gripped the improvised spear near the tape and unlocked the door. Leveling the weapon, he stepped back as the door swung in.

In two months of maintaining the ritual every time he opened any of the doors into the house, Ransom had yet to be met by anything. The precaution was one on which his son had insisted; the day of his departure north, Matt had pledged Ransom to maintaining it. With no intention of doing so, Ransom had agreed, only to find himself repeating the familiar motions the next time he was about to venture out to the garden. Now here he was, jabbing the end of the spear through the doorway to draw movement, waiting a count of ten, then advancing one slow step at a time, careful not to miss anything dangling from the underside of the porch roof. Once he was satisfied that the porch was clear, that nothing was lurking in the bush to its right, he called over his shoulder, "I'm on my way to check the garden, if you'd like to join me."

A chorus of ringing announced the crab's extricating itself from the sink. Legs clicking on the wood floors like so many tap shoes, it hurried along the hall and out beside him. Keeping the spear straight ahead, he reached back for one of the canvas bags piled inside the door, then pulled the door shut. The crab raced down the stairs and to the right, around the strip of lawn in front of the house. Watching its long legs spindle made the coffee churn at the back of his throat. He followed it off the porch.

Although he told himself that he had no desire to stare at the remnants of his neighbor Adam's house—it was a distraction; it was ghoulish; it was not good for his mental health—Ransom was unable to keep his eyes from it. All that was left of the structure were fire-blackened fragments of the walls that had stood at the house's northeast and southwest corners. Had Ransom not spent ten years living across the road from the white, two-story colonial whose lawn had been chronically overgrown—to the point that he and Heather had spoken of it as their own little piece of the rain forest—he could not have guessed the details of the building the fire had consumed. While he was no expert at such matters, he had been surprised that the flames had taken so much of Adam's house; even without the fire department to douse it, Ransom had the sense that the blaze should not have consumed this much of it. No doubt, the extent of the destruction owed something to the architects of the shape the house's destruction had revealed.

(*There's something in Adam's house,* Matt had said. The eyes of the ten men and woman crowded around the kitchen table did not look at him. *They've been there since before… everything. Before the Fracture. I've heard them moving around outside, in the trees. We have to do something about them.*)

About a month after they had moved into their house, some ten years ago, Ransom had discovered a wasps' nest clinging to a light on the far side of the garage. Had it been only himself, even himself and Heather, living there, he would have been tempted to live and let live. However, with an eight-year-old factored into the equation, one whose curiosity was recorded in the constellations of scars up his arms and down his legs, there was no choice. Ransom called the exterminator, and the next day the nest was still. He waited the three days the woman recommended, then removed the nest

by unscrewing the frosted glass jar to which it was anchored. He estimated the side stoop the sunniest part of the property; he placed the nest there to dry out. His decision had not pleased Heather, who was concerned at poison-resistant wasps emerging enraged at the attack on their home, but after a week's watch brought no super-wasps, he considered it reasonable to examine it with Matt. It was the first time he had been this near to a nest, and he had been fascinated by it, the gray, papery material that covered it in strips wound up and to the right. Slicing it across the equator had disclosed a matrix of cells, a little less than half of them chambering larvae, and a host of motionless wasps. Every detail of the nest, he was aware, owed itself to some physiological necessity, evolutionary advantage, but he'd found it difficult to shake the impression that he was observing the result of an alien intelligence, an alien aesthetics, at work.

That same sensation, taken to a power of ten, gripped him at the sight of the structure that had hidden inside Adam's house. Its shape reminded him of that long-ago wasps' nest, only inverted, an irregular dome composed not of gray pulp but a porous substance whose texture suggested sponge. Where it was not charred black, its surface was dark umber. Unlike the house in which it had grown up, Ransom thought that the fire that had scoured this dwelling should have inflicted more damage on it, collapsed it. In spots, the reddish surface of the mound had cracked to reveal a darker substance beneath, something that trembled in the light like mercury. Perhaps this was the reason the place was still standing. What had been the overgrown yard was dirt baked and burnt brittle by the succession of fires. At half a dozen points around the yard, the large shells of what might have been lobsters—had each of those lobsters stood the size of a small pony—lay broken, split wide, the handles of axes, shovels, picks spouting from them.

(Matt had been so excited, his cheeks flushed in that way that made his eyes glow. The left sleeve of his leather jacket, of the sweatshirt underneath it, had been sliced open, the skin below cut from wrist to shoulder by a claw the size of a tennis racket. He hadn't cared, had barely noticed as Ransom had washed the wound, inspected it for any of the fluid [blood?] that had spattered the jacket, and wrapped it in gauze. Outside, whoops and hollers of celebration had filled the morning air. *You should have come with us,* Matt had said, the remark less a reproach and more an expression of regret

for a missed opportunity. *My plan worked. They never saw us coming. You should have been there.* Despite the anxiety that had yet to drain from him, pride had swelled Ransom's chest. Maybe everything wasn't lost. Maybe his son… *Yes, well,* Ransom had said, *someone has to be around to pick up the pieces.*)

Ransom continued around the front lawn to what they had called the side yard, a wide slope of grass that stretched from the road up to the treeline of the rise behind the house. If the wreckage across the street was difficult to ignore, what lay beyond the edge of the yard compelled his attention. Everything that had extended north of the house: his next door neighbor Dan's red house and barn, the volunteer fire station across from it, the houses that had continued on up both sides of the road to Wiltwyck, was gone, as was the very ground on which it all had been built. As far ahead as Ransom could see, to either side, the earth had been scraped to bare rock, the dull surface of which bore hundred-yard gouges. Somewhere beyond his ability to guesstimate, planes of light like the one on the other side of his house occulted the horizon. Ransom could not decide how many there were. Some days he thought at least four, staggered one behind the other; others he was certain there was only the one whose undulations produced the illusion of more. Far off as the aurora(e) was, its sheer size made the figures that occasionally filled it visible. These he found it easier to disregard, especially when, as today, they were familiar: a quartet of tall stones at the top of a rounded mountain, one apparently fallen over, the remaining three set at irregular distances from one another, enough to suggest that their proximity might be no more than a fluke of geology; from within the arrangement, as if stepping down into it, an eye the size of a barn door peered and began to push out of. Instead, he focused on the garden into which he, Matt, and a few of his neighbors had tilled the side yard.

While Ransom judged the crab capable of leaping the dry moat and clambering up the wire fence around the garden, it preferred to wait for him to set the plank over the trench, cross it, and unlock the front gate. Only then would it scuttle around him, up the rows of carrots and broccoli, the tomatoes caged in their conical frames, stopping on its rounds to inspect a leaf here, a stalk there, tilting its shell forward so that one of the limbs centered in its back could extend and take the object of its scrutiny in its

claw. In general, Ransom attributed the crab's study to simple curiosity, but there were moments he fancied that, prior to its arrival in his front yard the morning after Matt's departure, in whatever strange place it had called home, the crab had tended a garden of its own.

Latching but not locking the gate behind him, Ransom said, "What about Bruce? That was what we called our dog… the only dog we ever had. Heather picked out the name. She was a huge Springsteen fan. The dog didn't look like a Bruce, not in the slightest. He was some kind of weird mix, Great Dane and greyhound, something like that. His body… it was as if the front of one dog had been sewed to the back of another. He had this enormous head—heavy jowls, brow, huge jaws—and these thick front legs, attached to a skinny trunk, back legs like pipe cleaners. His tail—I don't know where that came from. It was so long it hung down almost to his feet. I kept expecting him to tip over, fall on his face. I wanted to call him Butch, that or something classical, Cerberus. Heather and Matt overruled me. Matt was all in favor of calling him Super Destroyer, or Fire Teeth, but Heather and I vetoed those. Somehow, this meant she got the final decision, and Bruce it was."

The beer traps next to the lettuce were full of the large red slugs that had appeared in the last week. One near the top was still moving, swimming lazily around the PBR, the vent along its back expanding and contracting like a mouth attempting to speak. The traps could wait another day before emptying; he would have to remember to bring another can of beer with him tomorrow. He said, "Heather found the dog wandering in the road out front. He was in pretty rough shape: his coat was caked with dirt, rubbed raw in places; he was so thin, you could've used his ribs as a toast rack. Heather was a sucker for any kind of hard case; she said it was why she'd gone out with me in the first place. Very funny, right? By the time Matt stepped off the school bus, she'd lured the dog inside with a plateful of chicken scraps (which he devoured), coaxed him into the downstairs shower (after which, she said, he looked positively skeletal), and heaped a couple of old blankets into a bed for him. She tried to convince him to lie down there, and he did subject the blankets to extensive sniffing, but he refused to allow Heather out of his sight. She was… at that point, she tired easily—to be honest, it was pretty remarkable that she'd been able to do everything she

had—so she went out to the front porch to rest on the rocking chair and wait for Matt's bus. When she did, the dog—Bruce, I might as well call him that; she'd already settled on the name—Bruce insisted on accompanying her. He plopped down beside her and remained there until Matt climbed the front steps. I would have been worried… concerned about how Bruce would react to Matt, whether he'd be jealous of Heather, that kind of thing. Not my wife: when Matt reached the top of the stairs, the dog stood, but that was all. Heather didn't have to speak to him, let alone grab his collar."

The lettuces weren't ready to pick, nor were the cabbages or broccoli. A few tomatoes, however, were sufficiently red to merit plucking from the plants and dropping into the canvas bag. The crab was roaming the top of the garden, where they'd planted Dan's apple trees. Ransom glanced over the last of the tomatoes, checked the frames. "That collar," he said. "It was the first thing I noticed about the dog. Okay, maybe not the first, but it wasn't too long before it caught my eye. This was after Matt had met me in the driveway with the news that we had a guest. The look on his face… he had always been a moody kid—Heather and I used to ask one another, *How's the weather in Mattsville?*—and adolescence, its spiking hormones, had not improved his temperament. In all fairness, Heather being sick didn't help matters any. This night, though, he was positively beaming, vibrating with nervous energy. When I saw him running up to the car, my heart jumped. I couldn't conceive any reason for him to rush out the side door that wasn't bad: at the very best, an argument with his mother over some school-related issue; at the very worst, another ambulance ride to the hospital for Heather."

A blue centipede the size of his hand trundled across the dirt in front of him. He considered spearing it, couldn't remember if it controlled any of the other species in the garden. Better to err on the side of caution—even now. He stepped over it, moved on to the beans. He said, "Matt refused to answer any of my questions; all he would say was, *You'll see.* It had been a long day at work; my patience was frayed to a couple of threads and they weren't looking any too strong. I was on the verge of snapping at him, telling him to cut the crap, grow up, but something, that grin, maybe, made me hold my tongue. And once I was inside, there was Heather sitting on the

couch, the dog sprawled out beside her, his head in her lap. He didn't so much as open an eye to me.

"For the life of me, I could not figure out how Heather had gotten him. I assumed she had been to the pound, but we owned only the one car, which I'd had at work all day. She took the longest time telling me where the dog had come from. I had to keep guessing, and didn't Matt think that was the funniest thing ever? It was kind of funny… my explanations grew increasingly bizarre, fanciful. Someone had delivered the dog in a steamer trunk. Heather had discovered him living in one of the trees out front. He'd been packed away in the attic. I think she and Matt wanted to hear my next story."

Ransom had forgotten the name of the beans they had planted. Not green beans: these grew in dark purple, although Dan had assured him that they turned green once you cooked them. The beans had come in big, which Dan had predicted: each was easily six, seven inches long. Of the twenty-five or thirty that were ready to pick, however, four had split at the bottom, burst by jellied, inky coils that hung down as long again as the bean. The ends of the coils raised toward him, unfolding petals lined with tiny teeth.

"Shit." He stepped back, lowering the spear. The coils swayed from side to side, their petals opening further. He studied their stalks. All four sprang from the same plant. He swept the blade of the spear through the beans dangling from the plants to either side of the affected one. They dinged faintly on the metal. The rest of the crop appeared untouched; that was something. He adjusted the canvas bag onto his shoulder. Taking the spear in both hands, he set the edge of the blade against the middle plant's stem. His first cut drew viscous green liquid and the smell of spoiled eggs. While he sawed, the coils whipped this way and that, and another three beans shook frantically. The stem severed, he used the spear to loosen the plant from its wire supports, then to carry it to the compost pile at the top of the garden, in the corner opposite the apple trees. There was lighter fluid left in the bottle beside the fence; the dark coils continued to writhe as he sprayed them with it. The plant was too green to burn well, but Ransom reckoned the application of fire to it, however briefly, couldn't hurt. He reached in his shirt pocket for the matches. The lighter fluid flared with a satisfying *whump*.

The crab was circling the apple trees. Eyes on the leaves curling in the flames, Ransom said, “By the time Heather finally told me how Bruce had arrived at the house, I’d been won over. Honestly, within a couple of minutes of watching her sitting there with the dog, I was ready for him to move in. Not because I was such a great dog person—I’d grown up with cats, and if I’d been inclined to adopt a pet, a kitten would have been my first choice. Heather was the one who’d been raised with a houseful of dogs. No, what decided me in Bruce’s favor was Heather, her… demeanor, I suppose. You could see it in the way she was seated. She didn’t look as if she were holding herself as still as possible, as if someone were pressing a knife against the small of her back. She wasn’t relaxed—that would be an overstatement—but she was calmer.

“The change in Matt didn’t hurt, either.” Ransom squeezed another jet of lighter fluid onto the fire, which leapt up in response. The coils thrashed as if trying to tear themselves free of the plant. “How long had that boy wanted a dog… By now, we’d settled into a routine with Heather’s meds, her doctors’ visits—it had settled onto us, more like. I think we knew… I wouldn’t say we had given up hope; Heather’s latest tests had returned better than expected results. But we—the three of us were in a place we had been in for a long time and didn’t know when we were going to get out of. A dog was refreshing, new.”

With liquid pops, the four coils burst one after the other. The trio of suspect beans followed close behind. “That collar, though…” Bringing the lighter fluid with him, Ransom left the fire for the spot where the affected plant had been rooted. Emerald fluid thick as honey topped the stump, slid down its sides in slow fingers. He should dig it out, he knew, and probably the plants to either side of it, for good measure, but without the protection of a pair of gloves he was reluctant to expose his bare skin to it. He reversed the spear and drove its point into the stump. Leaving the blade in, he twisted the handle around to widen the cut, then poured lighter fluid into and around it. He wasn’t about to risk dropping a match over here, but he guessed the accelerant should, at a minimum, prove sufficiently toxic to hinder the plant from regrowing until he could return suitably protected and with a shovel.

There was still the question of whether to harvest the plants to either side. Fresh vegetables would be nice, but prudence was the rule of the day. Before they'd set out for the polar city with Matt, his neighbors had moved their various stores to his basement, for safe keeping; it wasn't as if he were going to run out of canned food anytime soon. Ransom withdrew the spear and returned to the compost, where the fire had not yet subsided. Its business with the apple trees completed, the crab crouched at a safe remove from the flames. Ransom said, "It was a new collar, this blue, fibrous stuff, and there was a round metal tag hanging from it. The tag was incised with a name, 'Noble,' and a number to call in case this dog was found. It was a Wiltwyck number. I said, *What about the owner? Shouldn't we call them?*

"Heather must have been preparing her answer all day, from the moment she read the tag. *Do you see the condition this animal is in?* she said. *Either his owner is dead, or they don't deserve him.* As far as Heather was concerned, that was that. I didn't argue, but shortly thereafter I unbuckled the collar and threw it in a drawer in the laundry room. Given Bruce's state, I didn't imagine his owner would be sorry to find him gone, but you never know.

"For five days Bruce lived with us. We took turns walking him. Matt actually woke up half an hour early to take him out for his morning stroll, then Heather gave him a shorter walk around lunchtime, then I took him for another long wander before bed. The dog tolerated me well enough, but he loved Matt, who couldn't spend enough time with him. And Heather… except for his walks, he couldn't bear to be away from her; even when we had passed a slow half-hour making our way up Main Street, Bruce diligently investigating the borders of the lawns on the way, there would come a moment he would decide it was time to return to Heather, and he would leave whatever he'd had his nose in and turn home, tugging me along behind him. Once we were inside and I had his leash off, he would bolt for wherever Heather was—usually in bed, asleep—and settle next to her."

He snapped the lighter fluid's cap shut and replaced it beside the fence. The crab sidled away along the rows of carrots and potatoes on the other side of the beans and tomatoes. Ransom watched it examine the feathery green tops of the carrots, prod the potato blossoms. It would be another couple of

weeks until they were ready to unearth, though after what had happened to the beans, a quick check was in order. “On the morning of the sixth day, Bruce’s owner arrived, came walking up the street the same way his dog had. William Harrow: that was the way he introduced himself. It was a Saturday. I was cooking brunch; Matt was watching TV; Heather was sitting on the front porch, reading. Of course, Bruce was with her. September was a couple of weeks old, but summer was slow in leaving. The sky was clear, the air was warm, and I was thinking that maybe I’d load the four of us into the car and drive up to the Reservoir for an afternoon out.”

On the far side of the house, the near curtain of light, on which he had watched the sunken island rise for the twentieth, the thirtieth time, settled, dimmed. With the slow spiral of food coloring dropped into water, dark pink and burnt orange spread across its upper reaches, a gaudy sunset display that was as close as the actual sky came to night anymore. A broad concrete rectangle took up the image’s lower half. At its other end, the plane was bordered by four giant steel and glass boxes, each one open at the top. To the right, a single skyscraper was crowned by an enormous shape whose margins hung over and partway down its upper stories. Something about the form, a handful of scattered details, suggested an impossibly large toad.

The first time Ransom had viewed this particular scene, a couple of weeks after Matt and their neighbors had embarked north, a couple of days after he had awakened to the greater part of Main Street and its houses gone, scoured to gray rock, he had not recognized its location. *The polar city?* Only once it was over and he was seated on the couch, unable to process what he had been shown, did he think, *That was Albany. The Empire State Plaza. Those weren’t boxes: they were the bases of the office buildings that stood there. Fifty miles. That’s as far as they got.*

He was close enough to the house for its silhouette to block most of the three figures who ran onto the bottom of the screen, one to collapse onto his hands and knees, another to drop his shotgun and tug a revolver out of his belt, the third to use his good hand to drag the blade of his hatchet against his jeans’ leg. The crab paid no more attention to the aurora’s display than it ever did; it was occupied in withdrawing one of the red slugs from a beer trap. Ransom cleared his throat. “Heather said she never noticed William Harrow until his work boots were clomping on the front stairs. She looked

up from her book, and there was this guy climbing to meet her. He must have been around our age, which is to say, late thirties. Tall, thin, not especially remarkable looking one way or the other. Beard, mustache… when I saw the guy, he struck me as guarded; to be fair, that could have been because he and Heather were already pretty far into a heated exchange. At the sound of the guy's feet on the stairs, Bruce had stood; by the time I joined the conversation, the dog was trembling.

"The first words out of Harrow's mouth were, *That's my dog.* Maybe things would have proceeded along a different course… maybe we could have reached, I don't know, some kind of agreement with the guy, if Heather hadn't said, *Oh? Prove it.* Because he did; he said, *Noble, sit,* and Bruce did exactly that. *There you go,* Harrow said. I might have argued that that didn't prove anything, that we ourselves had trained the dog to sit, and it was the command he was responding to, not the name; but Heather saw no point in ducking the issue. She said, *Do you know what shape this animal was in when we found him? Were you responsible for that?* and the mercury plummeted.

"Matt came for me in the kitchen. He said, *Mom's arguing with some guy. I think he might be Bruce's owner.*

"*All right,* I said, *hold on.* I turned off the burners under the scrambled eggs and home fries. As I was untying my apron, Matt said, *Is he gonna take Bruce with him?*

"*Of course not,* I said.

"But I could see… as soon as I understood the situation, I knew Bruce's time with us was over, felt the same lightness high in the chest I'd known sitting in the doctor's office with Heather a year and half before, which seems to be my body's reaction to bad news. It was… when Matt—when I…"

From either end of the plaza, from between two of the truncated buildings on its far side, what might have been torrents of black water rushed onto and over the concrete. There was no way for the streams to have been water: each would have required a hose the width of a train, pumps the size of houses, a score of workers to operate it, but the way they surged toward the trio occluded by the house suggested a river set loose from its banks and

given free rein to speed across the land. The color of spent motor oil, they moved so fast that the objects studding their lengths were almost impossible to distinguish; after his initial viewing, it took Ransom another two before he realized that they were eyes, that each black tumult was the setting for a host of eyes, eyes of all sizes, shapes, and colors, eyes defining strange constellations. He had no similar trouble identifying the mouths into which the streams opened, tunnels gated by great cracked and jagged teeth.

Ransom said, “Heather’s approach… you might say that she combined shame with the threat of legal action. Harrow was impervious to both. As far as he was concerned, the dog looked fine, and he was the registered owner, so there was nothing to be worried about. *Of course he looks good*, Heather said, *he’s been getting fed!*

“If the dog had been in such awful shape, Harrow wanted to know, then how had he come all the way from his home up here? That didn’t sound like a trip an animal as severely abused as Heather was claiming could make.

“He was trying to get as far away as he could, she said. Had he been in better condition, he probably wouldn’t have stopped here.

“This was getting us nowhere—had gotten us nowhere. *Look*, I said. *Mr. Harrow. My family and I have become awfully attached to this dog. I understand that you’ve probably spent quite a bit on him. I would be willing to reimburse you for that, in addition to whatever you think is fair for the dog.* Here I was, pretty much offering the guy a blank check. Money, right? It may be the root of all evil, but it’s solved more than a few problems.

“William Harrow, though… he refused my offer straightaway. Maybe he thought I was patronizing him. Maybe he was trying to prove a point. I didn’t know what else to do. We could have stood our ground, insisted we were keeping Bruce, but if he had the law on his side, then we would only be delaying the inevitable. He could call the cops on us, the prospect of which made me queasy. As for escalating the situation, trying to get tough with him, intimidate him… that wasn’t me. I mean, really.”

With the house in the way, Ransom didn’t have to watch as the trio of dark torrents converged on the trio of men. He didn’t have to see the man who had not risen from his hands and knees scooped into a mouth that did not close so much as constrict. He didn’t have to see the man with the pistol

empty it into the teeth that bit him in half. And he did not have to watch again as the third figure—he should call him a man; he had earned it—sidestepped the bite aimed at him and slashed a groove in the rubbery skin that caused the behemoth to veer away from him. He did not have to see the hatchet, raised for a second strike, spin off into the air, along with the hand that gripped it and most of the accompanying arm, as the mouth that had taken the man with the pistol sliced away the rest of the third man. Ransom did not have to see any of it.

(At the last moment, even though Ransom had sworn to himself he wouldn't, he had pleaded with Matt not to leave. *You could help me with the garden,* he had said. *You'll manage,* Matt had answered. *Who will I talk to?* Ransom had asked. *Who will I tell things to? Write it all down,* Matt had said, *for when we get back.* His throat tight with dread, Ransom had said, *You don't know what they'll do to you.* Matt had not argued with him.)

Its rounds of the garden completed, the crab was waiting at the gate. Ransom prodded the top of a carrot with the blunt end of the spear. "I want to say," he said, "that, had Heather been in better health, she would have gone toe-to-toe with Harrow herself… weak as she was, she was ready to take a swing at him. To be on the safe side, I stepped between them. *All right,* I said. *If that's what you want to do, then I guess there isn't any more to say.* I gestured at Bruce, who had returned to his feet. From his jeans pocket, Harrow withdrew another blue collar and a short lead. Bruce saw them, and it was as if he understood what had happened. The holiday was over; it was back to the place he'd tried to escape from. Head lowered, he crossed the porch to Harrow.

"I don't know if Harrow intended to say anything else, but Heather did. Before he started down the stairs with Bruce, Heather said, *Just remember, William Harrow: I know your name. It won't be difficult finding out where you live, where you're taking that dog. I'm making it my duty to watch you—I'm going to watch you like a hawk, and the first hint I see that you aren't treating that dog right, I am going to bring the cops down on you like a hammer. You look at me and tell me I'm lying.*

"He did look at her. His lip trembled; I was sure he was going to speak, answer her threat with one of his own… warn her that he shot trespassers, something like that, but he left without another word.

“Of course Heather went inside to track down his address right away. He lived off Main Street, on Farrell Drive, a cul-de-sac about a quarter of a mile that way.” Ransom nodded toward the stone expanse. “Heather was all for walking up there after him, as was Matt, who had eavesdropped on our confrontation with Harrow from inside the front door. The expression on his face… It was all I could do to persuade the two of them that chasing Harrow would only antagonize him, which wouldn’t be good for Bruce, would it? They agreed to wait a day, during which time neither spoke to me more than was absolutely necessary. As it turned out, though, Heather was feeling worse the next day, and then the day after that was Monday and I had work and Matt had school, so it wasn’t until Monday evening that we were able to visit Farrell Drive. To be honest, I didn’t think there’d be anything for us to see.

“I was wrong. William Harrow lived in a raised ranch set back about fifty yards from the road, at the top of a slight hill. Ten feet into his lawn, there was a cage, a wood frame walled and ceilinged with heavy wire mesh. It was maybe six feet high by twelve feet long by six feet deep. There was a large doghouse at one end with a food and water dish beside it. The whole thing… everything was brand new. The serial numbers stenciled on the wood beams were dark and distinct; the mesh was bright; the doghouse—the doghouse was made out of some kind of heavy plastic, and it was shiny. Lying half in the doghouse was Bruce, who, when he heard us pull up, raised his head, then the rest of himself, and trotted over to the side of the cage, his tongue hanging out, his tail wagging.

“Heather and Matt were desperate to rush out of the car, but none of us could avoid the signs, also new, that lined the edge of the property: NO TRESPASSING, day-glo orange on a black background. Matt was all for ignoring them, a sentiment for which Heather had not a little sympathy. But—and I tried to explain this to the two of them—if we were going to have any hope of freeing Bruce, we had to be above reproach. If there were a record of Harrow having called the police on us, it would make our reporting him to the cops appear so much payback. Neither of them was happy, but they had to agree, what I was saying made sense.

“All the same, the second we were back home, Heather had the phone in her hand. The cop she talked to was pretty agreeable, although she

cautioned Heather that as long as the dog wasn't being obviously maltreated, there wasn't anything that could be done. The cop agreed to drive along Farrell the next time she was on patrol, and Heather thanked her for the offer. When she hung up the phone, though, her face showed how satisfied she was with our local law enforcement."

Beyond the house, the scene at the Empire State Plaza had faded to pale light. Finished checking the carrots and potatoes, Ransom crossed to the gate. The crab backed up to allow him to unlatch and swing it in. As the crab hurried out, he gave the garden a final lookover, searching for anything he might have missed. Although he did not linger on the apple trees, they appeared quiet.

On the way back around the yard, the crab kept pace with him. Ransom said, "For the next month, Heather walked to Farrell Drive once a day, twice when she was well enough. During that time, Bruce did not leave his cage. Sometimes, she would find him racing around the place, growling. Other times, he would be leaping up against one wall of the pen and using it to flip himself over. As often as not, he would be lying half in the doghouse, his head on his paws. That she could tell—and believe you me, she studied that dog, his cage, as if his life depended on it (which, as far as she was concerned, it did)—Harrow kept the pen tidy and Bruce's dishes full. While she was careful not to set foot on the property, she stood beside it for half an hour, forty-five minutes, an hour. One afternoon, she left our house after lunch and did not return till dinner. When Bruce heard her footsteps, he would stop whatever he was doing, run to the nearest corner of the cage, and stand there wagging his tail. He would voice a series of low barks that Heather said sounded as if he were telling her something, updating the situation. *No change. Still here.*

"She saw Harrow only once. It was during the third-to-last visit she made to Bruce. After a few minutes of standing at the edge of the road, talking to the dog, she noticed a figure in the ranch's doorway. She tensed, ready for him to storm out to her, but he remained where he was. So did Heather. If this guy thought he could scare her, he had another thing coming. Although she wasn't feeling well, she maintained her post for an hour, as did Harrow. When she turned home, he didn't move. The strange thing was, she said to me that night, that the look on his face… granted, he wasn't exactly close to

her, and she hadn’t wanted him to catch her staring at him, but she was pretty sure he’d looked profoundly unhappy.”

The crab scrambled up the stairs to the porch. His foot on the lowest step, Ransom paused. “Then Heather was back in the hospital, and Matt and I had other things on our minds beside Bruce. Afterwards… not long, actually, I think it was the day before the funeral, I drove by William Harrow’s house, and there was the cage, still there, and Bruce, still in it. For a second, I was as angry as I’d ever been; I wanted nothing more than to stomp the gas to the floor and crash into that thing, and if Bruce were killed in the process, so be it. Let Harrow emerge from his house, and I would give him the beating I should have that September morning.

“I didn’t, though. The emotion passed, and I kept on driving.”

Ransom climbed the rest of the stairs. At the top, he said, “Matt used to say to me, *Who wants to stay in the shallows their whole life?* It was his little dig at his mother and me, at the life we’d chosen. Most of the time, I left his question rhetorical, but when he asked it that afternoon, I answered him; I said, *There are sharks in the shallows, too.* He didn’t know what to make of that. Neither did I.” Ransom went to say something more, hesitated, decided against it. He opened the door to the house, let the crab run in, followed. The door shut behind them with a solid *thunk.*

At the top of the garden, dangling from the boughs of the apple trees there, the fruit that had ripened into a score, two, of red replicas of Matt’s face, his eyes squeezed shut, his mouth stretched in a scream of unbearable pain, swung in a sudden breeze.

The Revel

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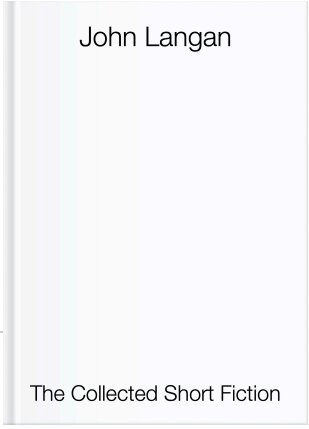

1 - The Chase

Every Werewolf story—these days, at least—features a chase. This one is no exception.

Indeed, it may well be that the chase has become the heart of the story, its true heart, and not the scene of transformation, which, while certainly spectacular, cinematic, the opportunity for all manner of verbal pyrotechnics, is light on meaning. The change to wolf, the face opening into snout, the fingers erupting into claws, the voice rushing the register from scream to howl, is about the animal within, and, at this point in our post-Darwinian history, how new or shocking is this?—whereas the chase is about predator and prey, and so about power, and so about matters more subtle and problematic. Most likely we will, and should, identify with the prey, find the predator a figure of fear. Most likely.

It may help to imagine the chase—whose narrative purpose is to draw you into the story immediately—projected on a movie screen. So much of contemporary horror fiction references film either as a substitute for written precedents or as inspiration for elaborately gruesome descriptions that such a suggestion should not seem surprising. You will want to imagine yourself in a darkened theater, probably with a date or a friend (since who goes to a horror movie alone?). Perhaps you have a tub of popcorn, perhaps a box of Sour Patch Kids, perhaps you find food at the theater distracting and annoying. When the screen lights, the first thing you are aware of is motion, is a pair of blurred legs racing forward. You hear breath panting, feet rustling dead leaves and cracking dead branches. As the camera switches to a long shot, you see that we are in a forest, one in upstate New York if you are able to determine such matters—if not, the forest will look more or less

familiar, depending on your location—and that it is late autumn. If you are the kind of person to be struck by such details, you may notice that the bare trunks, the occasional evergreen, have been photographed in such a way as to suggest a maze through which the man who owns the running legs is careening. At this distance, you can obtain a better view of him, as he bolts from left to right across the screen, almost tripping on a root. He is white, of average height, medium build, possibly mid- to late-thirties although it is hard to be sure, dressed in green camouflage pants, shirt, and baseball cap, brown boots, and a bright orange hunting vest. He does not appear to be carrying a gun of any kind. In the third shot, a close up of his face, you see that it is plain, undistinguished by anything more than the terror distorting it.

There is more, much more, that you could know about this man, the facts of an entire life. (Obviously, you would not have access to this in the opening scenes of a film.) For example, you could know that he is a graduate of Harvard University, at which he obtained his MBA and his wife. You could know that his older brother, Donald, first took him hunting when he was fourteen; it had to be Donald because their father had been killed the year before in a train wreck in Arizona (decapitated). You could know that, before he left to go hunting this morning, he changed his infant son's sodden diaper and found the pungent smell oddly endearing. You could know that he likes country music, that he enjoys bacon, egg, and cheese on a hard roll, that he has season tickets for the Yankees that he does not use as much as he would like. You could know something very bad about him—that when he was fifteen, he crushed the skull of a neighbor's Doberman with a baseball bat; you could know something very good about him—that recently he has contributed half the cost of a new daycare center at his church (Methodist). You could know all this but it is, in a sense, irrelevant. It's not irrelevant to him, of course, or to the people in his life, but it's of little matter to us, the audience. He is the sacrifice: he is here to be murdered, and rather horrifically at that, for our interest. His death begins the Revel. Certainly, there have been others before him, as we will find out later on, but he is the first we encounter, and the spilling of his blood consecrates the story's opening.

It would be possible to cut between the man's running legs and another set of legs, between his wide blue eyes and a pair of yellow eyes. Depending on the subsequent portrait of the Werewolf we mean to paint, we might dip into his consciousness at the outset, an effort also more easily realized in prose than on film. We might describe the copper blood on his tongue and lips, the sharp tang of the man's fear in his nostrils, the joyful surge of his muscles as he runs smoothly and well across the forest floor. Yet such details seem to give away too much too soon, as overly heavy-handed soundtrack music, rather than heightening tension, tends to relieve it. For the moment, then, let us keep the Werewolf off stage; for now, let him be that clash of leaves that draws ever closer.

Perhaps the man is talking as he runs, a half-sobbing chain of sound that includes numerous *Please God*s and a few *Oh Jesus*es and a number of indistinguishable words. Perhaps he says something like, "My kids, God, please, my kids," perhaps, "Blood, oh Jesus, blood." If we want, we can flash back to the scene of carnage from which he is fleeing, to a ribcage laid open and scarlet wet, trees splashed with viscera, but again, there will be time for that later, and most likely, the man is trying very hard not to think of that, because if he did, he might find himself too afraid to run. Instead, he is trying to think of the red pickup truck that he drove out here four hours ago and that cannot be much further. In fact, there it is, at the foot of the hill he has crested.

Now comes the cruel part of the story—the first cruel part, anyway—and that is that the man is going to be killed, at last, within sight of escape and freedom. At this point, we do not know if such cruelty is deliberate on the part of the Werewolf, or an accident of fate, simply the point at which the predator brings down the prey. It is what you are expecting, your heart pounding despite yourself: you know the man is going to be caught and killed by what is racing up behind him; the only real question is, How exactly is it going to happen? Will he fumble open the door to the truck, throw himself inside, slam the door behind him, thumb the lock, and collapse across the front seat, panting furiously, only to have the windshield crash in on him? Or will he even make it that far?

In this case, he will not make it inside the truck, because as he is running down the hill toward it—half falling would be more accurate, his boots

kicking up great scuffs of dirt and leaves—he is jamming his hand in the right front pocket of his pants, attempting to locate his keys, which do not seem to be there. His effort continues as he sprints the space between the foot of the hill and the truck, his cap, which has been ever more perilously perched atop his head, finally flying free, revealing a head of dark brown hair. He does not stop at the truck so much as slam into it, the loud thud jarring. He continues to shove his hand into his right, then his left pants pocket, his breath coming faster, his lips releasing a steady stream of "Oh come on" and "Oh God, come on," while in the background the sound of the Werewolf's pursuit, as it tops the hill, bounds down it, and surges toward the truck, is steadily louder.

You will not see the Werewolf leap on the man and in one fluid motion tear out his throat. You will listen to it. What you will see is shot from underneath the truck. You watch the man's boots, faced toward the truck at first then turning as something you cannot distinguish rushes closer. You hear the man's scream, and a growl that becomes a roar, and the sharp sound of teeth ripping out a large chunk of meat. The scream halts. The boots wobble, then sway to the left as the man, already a corpse, topples to the ground.

This is the beginning. Should we mention that the man's keys were in the left breast pocket of his bright orange hunting vest, tucked there by him because it had a button flap and so would keep them secure? This is just the kind of ironic detail that horror narratives love, isn't it? No doubt the irony has its effect, but no doubt, too, such occurrences validate the secret sense we have—perhaps it is more a secret fear—that such little things as what pocket you put your keys in are what make the difference between life and death, and not such big things as your faith in God or your lack thereof. The narrative to come will embrace this savage irony, take it to its breast, to the extent that it will be tempting to read the Werewolf as the incarnation of this trope. But it isn't, is it?

2 - The Setting (A): The Village

Here we are with the Chief of Police as he's driving along Main Street on his way to work. Slideshow, in rapid succession: shopping plazas, traffic

light, animal hospital, traffic light, Indian restaurant, insurance agent, houses, churches (Episcopal and Methodist), gas station, bus station, florist, Chinese restaurant, bank, bars, barber, deli, boutiques, bookstores, Greek restaurant, record store, traffic light, bar, bank, police station, bridge (across the Svartkill), Frenchman's Mountain (a long ridge stubbled with bare trees that walls the near horizon).

Of course the village he's driving through is based on a real place, so much so that it might be more honest to call it the name that marks it on the map of upstate New York. You have wondered—who hasn't?—to what extent the places you meet in stories and novels are tied to real locations. The answer is: more closely than you think. (The same is true of the people in them.) Nonetheless, we wish to preserve some freedom of movement, so that should we need the police station to be on the western edge of the village, as opposed to the center of downtown, we will be able to have it there. Let's call this place Huguenot, which should be an obvious enough clue to anyone who lives in or around the actual village to its true identity—but please, hold it loosely in mind.

Interesting, isn't it? how it has to be a village. It does seem as if much of horror fiction takes place in small communities, doesn't it? Of course there are exceptions: you can name one or two or ten narratives that contradict such an assertion, but consider the vast tide that fulfills it. Horror thrives in community, and what embodies community better than a village? Large enough to contain a number and variety of people, yet small enough for the majority of them to know one another, the village is the place where the threat to one can be felt by all. Perhaps there's a certain amount of nostalgia, too, in horror's love for the village, a longing for a kind of ideal community we don't experience anymore. Or perhaps not.

3 - The Setting (B): The Forest

Imagine tall trees stretching back into gloom on every side of you. It is not important that you have much arboreal expertise: if you do, picture oak, maple, the occasional birch; if not, picture your generic tree. The majority of trees in this area are deciduous, and thus autumn-bare, but a few evergreens jostle for elbow room. The ground is a jigsaw of yellow, brown,

red, and orange leaves. Huguenot, like so many other American settlements, was built within the great forest that once blanketed the North American continent, a blanket whose edges have steadily been pushed back, even as more houses, more buildings, have been constructed within the forest, in quest of the privacy that is supposed to be a mark of personal wealth and success. But the forest has not gone so far away as we might suppose. There are still groups of trees scattered throughout the village, and you do not have to drive very far—ten minutes, fifteen depending on the direction you choose—before you find one of the forest's fingers.

It may be that you think of the forest as little more than an abstraction; it may be that you are one of the people who believe in the forest as a pristine natural paradise, Robert Frost's woods so lovely, dark, and deep. If either of these is the case, take your car on one of those ten- or fifteen-minute drives, until you arrive at one of the digits the forest pokes into the world. Park your car. Leave your cellphone, your Blackberry, your iPod in the glove compartment. Lock the car. Be sure you put your keys someplace safe—someplace you can get to them quickly should the need arise—and walk out into the trees.

Don't stop after ten or fifteen minutes: keep going for an hour, two, until you are deep in a place you have not seen before. Feel free, should you like, to lean against a tree, sit on a log—mind it isn't rotten, though. Now, here, feel how far away you are from everyone and everything you know, feel to what distance your life—which is to say, the routines you inhabit—has receded. Look at the trees around you. They almost seem to form a maze, don't they? Feel how exposed you are. Something could be watching you, couldn't it? It sounds silly to say, yes, but something out behind one of these trees could be watching you. Try not to jump when you hear that crashing in the undergrowth. Most likely, it's a pair of squirrels chasing each other, or a fawn still clumsy. Do you think you can find your way back to your car? You did walk in a straight line, didn't you? What direction was that from? Something could be watching you, couldn't it? Can you feel the hairs on the back of your neck prickling? They really do that, you know.

What would you do if a tall, pale man in a soiled black suit stepped from behind one of the trees? What would you do when you saw that his eyes were yellow? Would you bolt? No one would blame you if you did. You

would find, though, that an hour is a long time to walk, and the woods are perhaps not so friendly as you had thought. Branches tug at your feet as you run over them; tree limbs whip your face and arms. You might find that everything looks the same, that you cannot find the route that brought you here. A look behind—do you dare risk a look behind? You know what you hear: growling (which makes you think of that dog you were so afraid of as a child), tree limbs snapping as something large barrels through them. It does not matter where you put your car keys, does it? because like our friend at the beginning of this story, you aren't going to have the chance to use them; you will not come close to finding your car. As you feel your pursuer closing in on you, you might as well scream, vent your rage and fear and frustration, empty your lungs. There is a deep laugh, the kind of laugh a big dog or a bear might make if such things could laugh, and then a lightning bolt of pain scores your neck as a massive paw strikes it open, almost separating your head from your body, which falls dead on the leaf-strewn ground. Your vision bursts white, and that is all you know. What remains of you will be found the following day, when the police chief is realizing that something very bad, an unprecedented bad, is on his hands.

The woods are dark and deep. Lovely?

4 - The Characters (A): The Police Chief

Tall, six foot three, but more than height, he gives the impression of size, as his weight pushes the red needle on his bathroom scale ever further from two hundred and fifty pounds and ever closer to three hundred. His doctor has told him to slim down, which he fully intends, but he can still bench as much as he could in the Navy, experiences no shortness of breath or chest pains, and finds it difficult to accept that his health has been or in any way might be impaired by what he estimates a few extra pounds. His hands and feet are almost abnormally large, so much so that it is difficult for him to find shoes that fit in any of the local stores, and his face is similarly large. His eyes are blue and liquid, his cheeks crisscrossed by red nets of capillaries, his nose narrow and close to his face. He wears his hair crewcut short. If he does not look particularly friendly, neither does he look particularly hostile; the principle impression he gives is of wariness.

He has held his position for the last half-dozen years, and he prides himself on knowing all Main Street's merchants, and all the town's clergy, by name. It is true that he knows not a few of them from various infractions of the law, ranging from Bill Getz—owner of Pete's Corner Pub—passing out in the middle of Main Street at four on a Saturday morning after sampling a bit too much of the thirty-year-old Armagnac a friend brought him from the south of France, to Judy Lavalle—former manager of the White Orchid boutique—stabbing her husband in the leg with a packing knife after she uncovered his affair with her assistant manager.

The Police Chief has an almost surprisingly forgiving attitude toward such faults. This is because he believes that, at root, human beings are hopelessly corrupt, depraved, every one of us always ready to cross some law or code of behavior should the opportunity present itself. The Police Chief does not understand why humanity is this way; he just knows it is. He is rarely surprised by any of the crimes, small or large, to which he is called on to respond. That is about to change.

Is it necessary to say that the Police Chief is the narrative's representative of order? In a horror narrative, it is rare for there not to be such a figure, either institutionally sanctioned or self-appointed. Such a character embodies the social structure(s) under assault from the monster. Close to the center of the story's events, s/he has access to all manner of information, as a result of which s/he serves as a kind of guide through the narrative's winding corridors. (This figure may also have ready access to all manner of weaponry, the benefits of which are not to be underestimated.)

Nowadays, it is common enough to show this character flawed—perhaps to express our continuing unease with the powers that regulate our lives, our suspicion that the institutions attacked by the monster were already rotting; or perhaps in the interest of heightening narrative tension. In case the Police Chief's sour view of humanity is not sufficient instance of this, it may help to know that, two years ago, in his official capacity, he systematically harassed Harold Stonger, former bartender at Dionysus bar and grill, over the course of three months, to the point that Stonger attempted suicide by opening his wrists with a box cutter. The Police Chief's reason for doing so was a car accident involving his then-eighteen-year-old daughter, Chloe, who had used a fake ID to consume four margaritas before sliding behind

the wheel of her 1990 Volvo. It was not the first time Chloe had used this ID, which was of almost professional quality. The accident her drinking led to consisted in her driving her car off the road and into a small tree at a relatively slow speed; although the consequences at home were severe, Chloe walked away from her car unharmed. Nonetheless, the Police Chief made it his personal mission to allow Harry Stonger no peace. Persistent and involved traffic stops, several raids on Dionysus leading to one sizable fine, a handful of visits to Stonger's apartment, left the man no doubt that the Police Chief wanted him gone from Huguenot. In all fairness to the Police Chief, he in no way encouraged Stonger to open his wrists, though when he learned of it he could only express his disappointment that the EMTs had not arrived at Stonger's apartment a little later.

5 - The Characters (B): Barbara Dinasha

Proprietor of the Dippie Hippie mostly used clothing store on Main Street, she is in her mid-forties, her long hair more gray than blond. Currently she lives in the small apartment over her store, where she sits at a black table next to the bay window that overlooks Main Street. She wears a white terrycloth robe over a peach cotton nightdress. There is a mug of coffee on the table, beside a yellow legal pad on which Barbara draws the man whose face has filled her dreams every night for the past two weeks. She uses a blue ballpoint pen whose scratch on the paper is the only sound aside from Barbara's breathing.

Barbara has resided in the apartment since last winter, when she moved there after having left her husband of fourteen years and their eight-year-old son, for reasons of which no one was sure but everyone had an opinion. Her husband—as yet, they remain legally separated, and when he has been drinking too much at Pete's Corner Pub, Tom Dinasha still expresses hope of an eventual reconciliation—is a carpenter and handyman and well liked, as is her precocious son, Brian, who is a star pitcher in the local Little League; but since Barbara draws most of her clientele from the SUNY college, her consequent dip in popularity with the village's permanent residents has not appreciably decreased her store's business.

Barbara likes the college students: she herself attended the State University twenty-five years before, which was how she came to Huguenot from Northport, Long Island. She majored in Studio Art before dropping out to spend the next seven years of her life on the Grateful Dead tour, which was not inconsistent with the reasons that had brought her upstate in the first place, namely, a desire to be at the school whose reputation was for maintaining the spirit and behavior of the sixties, in which Barbara was just old enough to regret not having been able to participate.

At a diner in Carbondale, Illinois, she met her future husband, who, as it happened, was a lifelong resident of Huguenot who was hitchhiking cross-country to see the Dead in St. Louis. They spent six months on the Dead tour, then returned to Huguenot, where Tom learned carpentry from his father, and they lived together in an old barn that he gradually rebuilt into a house. Tom Dinasha became a fixture in Huguenot, first as the guy you could call on when your regular guy couldn't make it, then as your regular guy. Barbara remained his elusive and somewhat aloof companion, observed taking the occasional art course at the college, but otherwise keeping to herself until a modest inheritance arrived after her father's death and she decided to open the Dippie Hippie. By that time, a year had passed since she had found herself pregnant and she and Tom had married because, as each said to her and his close friends and relations, neither of them was brave enough not to. At the wedding, Barbara's father had been well enough to give his daughter away; in six months, the cancer that had eaten one lung would have finished the rest of him. (Barbara's mother left the house when Barbara was fourteen, and she has not heard from or about her since.)

She doesn't care for the Chief of Police, who, from her interactions with him over the years, especially since opening the store, she has come to view as slow-moving, dull-witted, provincial, and bigoted. She knows he sees her as little more than an aging, would-be hippie who likely burned out what little there was of her mind to begin with years ago. (She does not know, but would not be surprised to learn, that he also suspects her of moving some kind of drug, probably pot but possibly something harder, through her store. While he has only entered the Dippie Hippie once, when it opened, to wish Barbara well in her enterprise, he and his officers make it a point both to watch it and to make Barbara aware that they are watching it.)

This morning, though she has seen his car pass down Main Street on its way to the station, the Police Chief is far from her concern. She is thinking about her dreams—dream might be the better word, since it has been substantially the same thing every night: she and a tall, pale man wearing a soiled black suit walking side by side in the woods, somewhere, she knows with dream-certainty, on Frenchman's Mountain (not that she has spent much time there). The man speaks to her, and this is where the variation in the dream occurs: every night, he says something different. One night, it was, "Do you know that Doors song?" Another, it was, "But you haven't told them, have you?" A third time, he said, "I could help you." She cannot remember all his utterances, although she has the sense that they tend to fall into one of two camps: either "Break on through, Barbara, break on through," or "Let me help you. All you have to do is say yes." Once he has spoken his piece, they stop and he turns to face her, extending his right hand in a gesture so familiar that she takes it without thinking. It feels strange, like holding a wet wire brush; looking down, she sees that his hand with its slender fingers has become a large paw, covered in bristly fur and soaked in bright red blood, which dribbles over her skin. She starts to look up at the man, is on the verge of seeing something, something crowds the top of her vision, when she sits upright in bed, awake.

Barbara does not believe in this man/monster as having any objective existence. Despite the fear, the weirdness, occasioned by the recurrence of him in her dreams, she understands him to be no more than the manifestation of a subconscious feeling that has become lodged—temporarily, she had thought—in the theater of her unconscious. This emotion is guilt, its source her leaving her son.

Needless to say, we know better, don't we? In a horror story, dreams, hunches, instincts—those parts of our lives we file under the headings of the Irrational, or the Atavistic—are keys with which the narrative presents its characters. Those who accept those keys fit them to the locks of the doors in front of them, find their way through to the next part of the maze; those who let them drop to the floor will live long enough to regret their mistake. Of course, part of the function of these elements is to add to the sense of unease the story wishes to evoke in the reader by appealing to her or his own experience of them. In addition: 1) they move the narrative

along; 2) they're an economical way of introducing or incorporating the more fantastic elements of the story into it; and 3) they form part of the springboard from which the protagonist(s) will take the leap into whatever impossible explanation is required for the horrors confronting them. In the end, the narrative will go beyond merely invoking this side of experience; it will validate it, privilege it, as if to say that it is in everything we do our best to suppress, to trivialize, that survival lies.

Barbara is our anchor; she is the character who stands for the rest of the village inhabitants. Unlike the Police Chief, the Werewolf, you, Barbara cannot go everywhere, see everything. As the Revel continues and the narrative veers from extravagance to extravagance, she stays in place, refusing the madness of the dance.

6 - The Characters (C): The Werewolf

What about the Werewolf, then?

To be frank, it's a dilemma. While it remains off-stage, no more than a shadow cast across its victims, the monster is a blank, an empty space you fill with your fears, with whatever chases you from sleep and makes you sit bolt upright in bed at four in the morning, heart banging. At the moment, the Werewolf is your Werewolf; it is whatever you have conjured from hearing that word and reading about his depredations. (Might we go so far as to say that, right now, the Werewolf is you? [No, no, of course not.])

That won't do, though, will it? You would like a photograph of him, wouldn't you? over which you might linger. You would like to examine his face closely, pore over each and every detail of it, attempt to match what is outside to what is inside. Are you familiar with phrenology? It was a nineteenth-century science that tried to ascertain personality characteristics through mapping the shape of the skull. You laugh at such an idea—we all do—but how far away from it are we, truly? We search the newspaper and magazine pictures of the perpetrators of whatever outrage currently confronts us, desperate for a clue to their motivation in the set of their eyes, the curve of their mouths, the tilt of their heads. We stare at ourselves in mirrors, trying to see what it is in the mystery of our faces that makes us fail the way we do.

You would like a picture: will a drawing suffice? Three drawings, actually: that's what Barbara Dinasha has produced on her legal pad. Her work is rough, but there is a sureness to it that makes you wonder what would have become of her had she remained in the college's art program. The first shows the man's head: squarish, its features sharply angled, so much so that it might remind you of a piece of Cubist sculpture. In her dreams, the man has impressed her as made of edges, as if his face had been struck from a block of flint by quick blows from a hammer. The hair is lank, parted on the right side; Barbara has shaded it with her pen, seeing the blue ink as dark brown that does not appear to have been washed in the last two or three days. She has dotted the square jaw to indicate the dark stubble traversing it. The nose is broad and flat; the lips full and the mouth wide; the eyes wide and dark—brown, Barbara thinks, although they may be black.

Her second sketch is of the man's hands, which are distinguished by long, thin fingers and particularly the ring fingers, which stretch longer than the middle fingers. Fine hair covers the back of the hands out along to the ends of the fingers. The edges of the nails are ragged, dirty.

Barbara's final drawing is of the man in whole, a slender figure dressed in a dark suit and white dress shirt open at the collar. Like the others, it sufficiently resembles the man from her dreams that, were the police pursuing him—as they are, though they do not know it—they could do worse than show these drawings to men and women on the street, post copies of them in conspicuous places. Barbara, however, is as unsatisfied with this one as she is the two others. In part, her discontent arises from the limitations of her medium. There is no way for her to render the man's voice, which lingers in her ears as if he had whispered there a moment ago. It is deep, more so even than her father's, and he sang bass for the church choir, and it possesses a calm authority that she would find appropriate to a surgeon. The remainder of Barbara's discontent is rooted in her inability to reproduce the feeling the man leaves in her. Were she to take up her pen once more and add a pair of goat horns to his head and a goatee his chin, bedeck him with a barbed tail and pitchfork, and surround him with a corona of flames, the effect, while exaggerated and cartoonish, would more closely approximate that he has on her.

Something more? Something more definite? How about this: there's an old man, Mr. Dock, the former head librarian of the village library, who has retired to his bungalow halfway out to Frenchman's Mountain. Were you to show him Barbara Dinasha's sketches, his brow would contract, he would remove his glasses for a cleaning from a handkerchief, then inspect the drawings again. Unable to deny his recognition, he might tell you about a young man who left Huguenot to study medicine up in Albany when he, Mr. Dock, was thirteen, some seventy years gone. Alphonse Sweet came of the Quebecois who moved into the region at the end of the nineteenth century; a bright lad, though cruel, terribly cruel. He didn't return, Alphonse—killed, it was said, up in some sort of ghost town in Western Canada under dubious circumstances. He was buried there. No, Mr. Dock doesn't know what Alphonse was doing there.

(Oh—and hungry: the Werewolf is always hungry.)

7 - The Characters (D): You

Yes, you're part of this. Do you even need to ask? You leap from character to character, a voyeur rifling through home movies of the most intimate sort:

—You're the Police Chief receiving the call that Ed Cook, the County ME, has been found dead in the doorway to his apartment. Rubbing the sleep from your eyes, you listen to Shelley Jacobson struggling to keep her voice calm as she says that Ed had been torn open, there was blood all over the place, and while they aren't sure, it looks as if certain… parts have been removed from the body. Bile burning at the back of your throat, you say, Let me guess: kidneys, part of the liver, and the tongue. That's right, Jacobson says, the emotion in her words momentarily overwhelmed by her surprise. You don't tell her that the same selection had been removed from each of the hunters found on Frenchman's Mountain, that Ed Cook had phoned you to discuss this last night. Looks like we've got a gourmand on our hands, he'd said, almost his final words to you. You don't repeat his attempt at witticism; instead, you tell Shelley that you'll be right there and hang up.

—You’re Barbara Dinasha, opening the latest letter from the oncologist, skimming his most recent plea to you to return for treatment; even if the cancer isn’t curable, there’s a decent chance that treatment could earn you another three months, possibly more. You remember your doctor telling you that your constant tiredness wasn’t chronic fatigue: it was your body exhausting itself on the invader that already had colonized most of it. You’re not that far away from the overwhelming panic that rose in you as you left the doctor’s office, that manifested itself in the desire to run, to escape, to leave the life you had and keep moving until nothing familiar remained—within a week, it was this impulse that would take you from your home and family to the apartment over the store, a flight that solved nothing, simplified nothing, that only made the situation of your dying worse. By the time you understood that you needed to talk to Tom, to Brian, things had reached the point that you could not see a way to do so. You drop the letter into the trash and, for an instant, hear a voice saying, “I could help you, Barbara. All you have to do is ask.”

—You’re each and every one of the Werewolf’s victims. You’re the quartet of hunters sitting around their early morning fire, fighting the chill air with a flask of Talisker, your rifles propped against the logs you’re sitting on, less concerned with firing those guns than with maintaining an annual tradition fifteen years old, a kind of secular retreat, and if one of you should by luck take down a prize buck, that would be nice, but it’s not essential. You’re the single mother out for a morning jog who’s decided to take one of the paths on the Mountain, even though it’s hunting season and your mother has warned you about the idiots out who can’t tell the difference between a woman and a deer. You’re the ME, wishing you felt one-tenth as calm as you did your best to sound to the Police Chief, glad that at least you spoke with him before you opened the bottle of gin chilling in your freezer, which you already know will do nothing to dilute the images of those four men’s remains—and never has that euphemism been so accurate—but which may help to still the shaking that has seized your hands since you drew to the end of the final autopsy. You’re a pair of dancers leaving The Blue Belle out on Route 299, discussing whether to drive into the village for a drink at Peter’s Corner Pub because, although it’s close to two, Pete’s will still be open, and the two of you are wound tight from too many cigarettes and too

many lap dances for too many freaks, who seem to have been drawn from their caves, their mother's basements, by the last few days' carnage. You're the chef, sous-chef, and waitress in early to the Toreador on Main Street to assemble salads, start soups, and decide on the day's specials, the three of you unable to discuss much besides the killer who has chosen Huguenot as his theater, and about whom a host of rumors, most centered on what he's taken from the bodies of those he's butchered, are in heavy circulation.

—You might even be the Werewolf himself, which the hunters experience as something enormous, dark, snarling, that leaps into their midst and lays one of them open before any has registered its presence. For the single mother out on the mountain trail, the Werewolf is first the tall, pale man whose black suit is soaked with the blood of the man in whose exposed insides he's rooting around, and then he's something else, something she knows the moment she pivots away from she has no chance of outrunning, but maybe she can call for help before it's too late. For the ME, the Werewolf is a tall, pale man in a soiled black suit standing outside his apartment door, who, when he grins, shows a mouth with many too many teeth. For the dancers, the Werewolf is a rising growl in the backseat of the car. For the staff of Toreador, the Werewolf is a roar and shape too big for their narrow kitchen.

8 - Some Headlines (In Lieu of Successive Descriptions of, Essentially, the Same Thing)

HUNTERS KILLED: Four Men Found Murdered on Frenchman's Mountain; Woman Who Notified Police Missing.

CORONER MURDERED: Was Working On Slain Hunters; Police Chief Refuses to Rule Out Connection to Previous Crime.

DANCERS MISSING: Were Seen Leaving The Blue Belle Two Nights Ago; Car Found Abandoned and Bloody.

RESTAURANT MASSACRE: Staff at Local Café Victims of Horrific Crime.

HUGUENOT HORROR: Upstate New York Town Terrorized by Savage Murder Spree; Twelve Confirmed Dead, Additional Deaths Feared; Residents Panicked; Local and State Police Baffled.

9 - A Small Town in the North

Where does he come from, the Werewolf? What drew Alphonse Sweet (it's he: no need to play coy) to that ghost town in Western Canada? What did he find there? Why did he leave his studies at Albany in the first place? What was he looking for?

The answers lie on the other side of an experience that the monster himself cannot articulate; when he tries to bridge it to them, he sees images sparse and stark.

White. Whiteness. The town,
Distant on the tundra.
Words on white paper.
Two rows of buildings,
The town sits on the plain, lonely
Even of ghosts.
Wind whistles up Main
Street. Empty windows return
No reflections.
Snow breaks underfoot.
Wooden planks groan, protesting
The wind's attention.
Flurries cloud the air.
At the heart of swirling snow,
Five figures standing.
Heavy fur robes drape
Bodies. Carved animal masks
Substitute for faces.
A plea, an offer,
A withered hand extended,
Taken. Whiteness. White.

10 - Trees Painted on Plywood Walls

For Barbara, the narrative's climax begins with a crash that jolts her from a (blessedly) dreamless sleep. Eyes wide, heart thwacking against her sternum, she sits up in bed, a single question, *What was that?* flashing in her mind in great neon blue letters. She does not know the answer. Was it a lamp? She doesn't think so. This sound was not the dull clang of metal echoing off a hardwood floor: it was brittle, the sharp crack of glass breaking—one of her windows, maybe, or the full-length mirror hung sideways in the living room to give the space the illusion of increased size. Is there an intruder in her apartment? She listens for the floor creaking under the weight of an intruder's sneaker, but hears nothing.

Barbara throws back her bed's heavy quilt and rises from it, stooping to take the heavy flashlight she keeps under the bed in case of a blackout. The flashlight has a nylon loop at its end to slip around your wrist; Barbara does so, gripping the flashlight close to the end because she does not want it for illumination: she wants it for a weapon. Should there be anyone prowling her apartment, be he sociopath or drunken fratboy, she intends to beat him senseless first and ask questions later. She does not feel self-conscious or melodramatic in the least. Nor does she recognize her response to the noise within the context of a horror narrative as ill-advised, if not a mistake of the fatal variety; Barbara doesn't care for horror stories—though no doubt she would know the scene she is in if you pointed it out to her.

She slides across the floor to the door, where she listens while counting to two hundred, time enough for any intruder to think that the noise he heard from her bedroom was nothing more than her turning over in her sleep. She leans her head out of the doorway far enough for her to see down the short hallway to the living room. The living room appears to be empty. She cannot see all of it from here, however, so, flexing her fingers on the flashlight and raising it, Barbara steps from her bedroom and crosses the distance to the living room, more calm than she would have predicted had you asked her to imagine herself in such a scene, yet still apprehensive lest one of the boards in the hall floor creak and betray her. None do. She halts at the threshold to the living room and tilts forward, peering from side to side. She still cannot see every last bit of the living room, but it appears

empty; neither does she observe evidence of broken glass, either from the windows or the mirror on the wall. Taking a breath, Barbara steps into the room.

No one is there. Having established this fact through a series of quick glances, Barbara verifies it by turning in a slow circle, flashlight held at the ready. The room is empty of anyone save herself; nor have its contents been disturbed. Whatever she heard must have come from outside. Relaxing her grip on the flashlight, Barbara walks to the bay window and surveys Main Street. It's quiet. A group of college kids, most of them underage, no doubt, stands in front of Pete's Corner Pub, smoking and talking—given the presence of the killer, an exercise in collective bravado. A state police car cruises up the street, drawing glances from the kids. It would appear that none of the plate glass windows opening into the shops along Main Street has been smashed. Barbara steps back and, with one more look around the living room, exits it.

She is at the doorway to her bedroom, which is to say, she has walked a short distance in a short time (though it has been time enough for her to wonder if the noise she heard was a vivid dream [not that she knows anything about those]), when there is another crack, louder than the first, the same crash of shattering glass, without a doubt from the living room. Barbara jumps, then turns and runs back into the living room, flashlight firmly in hand.

This time, she sees immediately that the mirror has fallen completely from its frame, which contains only darkness. "Shit," she says, crouching to search for pieces of glass, which, she thinks, it's a wonder didn't slice her foot.

Although there are no lights on in Barbara's apartment except for the nightlight in her bathroom, there is enough light streaming in through the front window for her to be able to see around the living room surprisingly well. As she slides her hand over the floor, that light dims, as if someone had his hand on a dial and turned it all the way to zero. It's like the descriptions Barbara has read of losing consciousness: everything goes black; the only difference is that Barbara maintains awareness as the room vanishes around her. She is not afraid, only confused, wondering what has

happened; some type of power outage, she supposes, which reminds her of her flashlight, whose switch she locates and slides on.

She is no longer in her living room. A corridor stretches in front of and behind her, its walls unstained plywood, its ceiling somewhere in the darkness overhead. Her apartment's hardwood floor has been replaced by gray concrete. The plywood walls are decorated with trees painted in black, white, and gray, some thick, some thin, as if trying to suggest perspective. They have all been painted with branches bare. Looking at them, Barbara thinks of her dreams, of standing with the tall pale man in the woods on Frenchman's Mountain. Barbara points the flashlight from walls to floor, from floor to ceiling (undistinguishable), from ceiling to walls, from walls to ceiling, from ceiling to floor, unable to understand what she is seeing, the part of her brain that processes information jammed. The mundaneness of her surroundings only adds to her confusion. Were she to find herself transported to an alien jungle teeming with wailing blue flowers, slithering pink vines, a six-legged green beast with a mouth of curving fangs creeping toward her, the landscape and its inhabitants would be consistent with the strangeness of the shift; the weirdness of this move, however, strains against the ordinariness of her slapdash surroundings, the kind of thing you might expect at a low-budget haunted house at Halloween. Walls, floor, walls, ceiling, floor, walls, walls, walls: she jerks the flashlight from one to the other frantically, as if one of the surfaces is going to surrender the secret of what has happened to her. She drags her free hand through her hair, hoping the pain of her fingers tearing through its tangles will yank her out of this place and back to reality. But all the pain does is to confirm the concrete cold beneath her, the painted trees shining on the coarse walls.

Barbara switches off the flashlight, plunging herself into darkness once more. She counts to ten, then turns the flashlight back on. When she does, she is again faced with the plywood walls and their arboreal decorations; this time, though, the sight of those walls prompts her to action. Perhaps a failsafe switch has been thrown somewhere in the depths of her brain; perhaps the neurons that had stalled have been bypassed. Barbara stands and approaches the wall to her right. It is solid—braced, it seems, from the other side. Letting the flashlight dangle, she tries with both hands to move it, with no more luck. Annoyance prickles her skin, causes her to mutter,

“What is this?” There is as much reason to walk forward as back, so Barbara starts walking forward. As she does, she sees a white light shining in the distance ahead. Thinking it might be the flashlight reflecting on a window or mirror, she slides the switch to off. When the light continues to shine, Barbara switches the flashlight on and hurries toward it. She keeps the beam on the floor in front of her, but the glow is strong enough for her to be able to see the walls on either side of her. The trees painted on them appear to writhe as she passes them; a trick of the light, she is sure.

As she moves ahead, Barbara notices that the corridor branches off on either side of her at irregular intervals. While she wonders where those branchings lead, she does not linger at any of them. Should this light in front of her be a disappointment, there will be time for her to return to them. It occurs to her that she is walking through a giant maze—being led through it, more like—and then she hears something. It is difficult to say what it is: it is one of those sounds that is so low, so soft, that you are not sure you even heard it in the first place; you are not sure it was not your mind whispering to you. If there is someone in the room with you, you will say, “Excuse me?” and the other person will look up from their book and say, “I didn’t say anything.” Barbara stops walking, and the sound appears to halt as well. Maybe it was only her feet echoing off the concrete and plywood. There it is again, faintly, a sound, a sound like, a sound like someone weeping, like someone at the hiccoughing end of hours of unrelenting crying. It seems to be coming from the other side of the wall to her right; how far back from it, Barbara cannot guess. Could it be another person, someone else trapped in here with her? What else could it be? Barbara takes a deep breath and calls out, “Hello! Is there anyone there? Can anyone hear me? Hello! I’m over here! Can you hear me? Hello?” Her voice slaps flat against the plywood. She looks at the wall, which is painted with a series of spectral white trees that remind her of birches. There is no answer. The weeping fades. Barbara repeats her call, receives no answer, tries a third time. When she judges she has waited a sufficient time for a reply and has had none, she continues toward the light. She does not hear the sound of weeping any more.

Before long, Barbara sees that the light in front of her is a single lightbulb, dangling at one end of a cord running into the darkness overhead. It marks

the end of the corridor: a third wall connects those to either side of her, blocking her way. A single black tree, squat, enormous, its branches spreading out like a web of nerves, decorates the surface. Barbara's pace slows as a combination of anger and unease seizes her legs. She is on the verge of turning around when she notices what appears to be the outline of a door set in the wall, at the heart of the tree. Directing the flashlight's beam at it, she sees that there is a door: there is the doorknob; there are the hinges. With her luck, she thinks, it'll be locked.

She is wrong. When she grips the doorknob and turns it, the door swings open easily. Stepping through it, she finds herself in a large dark space, at the far end of which a man sits at a table, lit by a source she cannot identify. When Barbara sees the man, her pulse quickens, sweeping the anger and unease from her. From her place at the door, she calls, "Hello? Hello?" and walks toward him.

"Barbara, welcome!" the man says.

11 - A Cabin in the Woods

For the Police Chief, the narrative's climax begins on Frenchman's Mountain, to which he has driven this afternoon in order to revisit the site of the first murder—well, the first victim he discovered, when he pulled his cruiser up behind the dusty black pickup parked well back from the road up and over Frenchman's Mountain in a makeshift lot favored mainly by occasional hunters. In twenty years on the job, the Police Chief can count on his fingers the number of cases he's worked that have stymied him the way this one has, left him feeling he's playing perpetual catch-up. Of all the unpleasant sensations that attend his job, this is the one he likes the least; in fact, he detests it. Things are bad enough that were the State Troopers, or even the Feds, who appeared yesterday, to untangle this mess, he could not only live with it, but be happy about it. As things stand, though, the smug attitudes the State Troopers brought with them melted away at the sight of the first group of victims; nor have they had any more success stopping, let alone catching, the killer than the Police Chief and his staff. For the first time, he actually feels a certain solidarity with the men and women he

generally considers his rivals. Should things continue the way they have been, he expects even the Feds will seem more human.

However, the Police Chief doesn't intend to let the situation progress any further, so he's driven out here, to revisit the scene of that first discovery. He's parked at one end of a dirt road that curves away from Route 299. To his right, the ground is straight for about fifty feet, then rises in a steep hill down which the marks of the first victim's run remain visible. To his left, the ground dips to a line of trees that stretches around in front of him and climbs the side of the hill. Directly ahead of him is the spot where the hunter's boots and jeans were visible sprawled beside the truck over which the rest of him had been splashed. The ground remains dark from the blood that soaked into it.

Despite his belief in humanity's innate depravity, the Police Chief has been shocked by what he has witnessed this last week. Like listening to a talk in a language he only partly understands, his mind cannot process everything it has taken in. He has not felt afraid so much as amazed, as if he has voyaged to a strange new country whose people follow customs utterly alien to him. Before now, the worst thing he had seen had occurred when he was in the Navy and serving on the flight deck of the Intrepid. In a moment of fatal carelessness, a sailor walked into the spinning propeller of an airplane. That had been worse than bad, but it had been an accident. The savagery of this past week reeks of intention, but an intention neither the Police Chief nor any one of his fellows has been able to see to the bottom of. It's the kind of over-the-top behavior you find in Hollywood melodramas, not daily life. And yet, here they are.

As a rule, the Police Chief is not afraid of the woods. Over the course of his life he has spent a good deal of time in them, and he possesses the confidence that comes with experience; in addition, he is sufficiently large that most things he might encounter in the woods of upstate New York have the good sense to avoid him, and any that do not, he has more than a fair chance of being able to handle, and well at that. (The handgun riding his hip doesn't hurt his confidence.) Now, though, he feels a finger of fear tickle the base of his spine as he realizes that he is being watched. The forest is quiet, so much so that his breathing, the leaves crackling under his shoes, sound loud as thunderclaps. With the certainty of religious revelation, he

knows that the killer, the monster behind the murders of twelve men and women, is standing about halfway up the hill to his right, just far enough back in the woods to prevent him from being seen. He is watching the Police Chief's actions with a keen and rapacious intelligence, a savage humor. Were the Police Chief's sense of the killer's location a shade more definite, he could draw his gun and do his best to validate that hunch. Since it isn't, there is nothing for him to do but sprint in that direction, certain that, by the time he arrives at the man's position, he will long since have been reabsorbed by the trees.

As his quadriceps and calves burn with the effort of propelling him up the hill, as his hand grips the butt of his pistol, ready to haul it from its holster, the Police Chief realizes that the killer is not moving, that he can feel the man's gaze on him still, a spotlight illuminating him as his feet push off soil that slides away beneath them. He knows that it can't be this simple, that the killer isn't just waiting for the Police Chief to take him in, that either he's ready to bolt or this is a trap, but if the killer will wait until the Police Chief reaches the top of this hill—if he judges there's no way this big a man could catch him, the Police Chief is ready to put that conceit to the test. If the man has laid some sort of trap, the Police Chief is ready to try that, too.

He gains the top of the hill and keeps going, pushes himself not to slacken, to slow. His lungs are bellows full of fiery air. Ahead and to the right, about fifteen feet into the trees, is that…? A tall figure regards his approach, its shadowed face broken by a bright grin, and the Police Chief's gun is out and in his hand. Now the killer turns, but it's too late, even as he breaks into a run, the Police Chief is too close for him to escape. He considers dropping to a firing crouch, but there are too many trees, not to mention the possibility—though faint—of a random civilian out for a walk. It's no matter: the sight of the tall man running has sent a tide of adrenaline through the Police Chief, and the prospect of closing his hands on this maniac fills his pounding heart with fierce joy.

The killer leads the Police Chief along a trail so faint as to be non-existent, cutting right, left, right, left, and left again. Leaves crash, sticks snap, the occasional stone shoots away from the toe of the Police Chief's boot. One misstep and he's down with a broken ankle, but he doesn't slow his pace. As the killer turns right, down a short rise, then left along a dry stream bed,

the Police Chief stays on him. When he dodges right over a large mound and along another trail barely there, the Police Chief draws closer to him. He does not recognize the place to which he has been led. Rows of evergreens zigzag away like the walls of so many hallways. The air is full of the Christmas smell of pine. In front of the killer, a line of evergreens lock branches in a dark green wall.

Without breaking stride, the tall man plunges into the trees. The Police Chief follows. For a long moment, he can see nothing. Branches whip his face; he raises his forearms and lowers his head. The trees extend deeper than he had anticipated. He can hear the killer pushing through trees mere feet ahead of him. If the man wants to ambush him, coming out from this thicket offers a perfect opportunity: a second to gain your bearings, and then turn your attention on your pursuer. Guarding his face with his free hand, the Police Chief lowers his gun.

Events are moving too quickly for the Police Chief to articulate what he expects on the other side of these evergreens. Were it possible to slow time, he might say that he judges it most likely that the killer will be on the move once more; however, he would not be surprised to find the man standing off to one side or the other, a knife or hatchet in his upraised hand. Whatever he expects, it is not what confronts him as he bursts free of the trees at last. It is a cabin, the kind of slope-roofed box hunters use to insure they're in proper position as the sun is on the rise. The entire structure sits a foot or so off the ground, raised by concrete blocks to discourage pests and keep seasonal floodwater out. Its walls are maybe ten feet to a side; the largest one holds a wide window. To the left of the window a door hangs open.

Gun in front of him, the Police Chief circles the back of the cabin. It wouldn't do for the killer to slip out a back door while the Police Chief frets a possible ambush at the front. A quick duck to the ground to glance up under the cabin confirms the front door as the only entrance. The Police Chief pauses his survey as he approaches the front wall and its large window. No doubt the killer can hear him rustling the leaves out here, but sound can play tricks on you; no need to assist the man with a clear view of him. Stepping close to the cabin, the Police Chief lowers himself and eases around it, well below the bottom of the window. In front of him, the open door blocks his view of the cabin's interior. The Police Chief has a vision of

the killer standing in the doorway, a loaded shotgun in his hands. Or worse, a bomb, something that will reduce the two of them to burnt blood and carbon.

Never mind, he thinks as he creeps around the door. As long as the killing stops, never mind.

A glance shows the doorway empty, the edge of what might be a couch on the right. The Police Chief's best guess: the killer is hiding behind the couch, using it for cover. The Police Chief is reasonably certain his gun will find that couch little of an obstacle. He releases the safety, clears the door. In the floor, gun to the right. On the count of three. THREE!

12 - Six Drawings Hung in a Coffeehouse

At last, the height of the Revel, the moment the characters gather to enact the story's culmination. Here exposition, explanation, digression, flashback, analysis, have ceased their usefulness; here we have reached the point of the pure image. How many such images does it take to convey a story's climactic actions? Two, four? How about six?

You may want to imagine these as large drawings, each one done on paper eleven inches wide by fourteen inches long. They're mounted on black cardboard that presumably intends to frame them, but each one has been placed slightly askew—apparently in error, since the misplacement adds nothing to each picture—and it's hard not to be annoyed by this. The pictures have been executed in pencil traced with pen and ink, colored in places with dabs of watercolor. Their style: if you know about such things, you will recognize the debt they owe to the early work of Bernie Wrightson, who illustrated the original *Swamp Thing* comic books; the figures display the same rubbery fleshiness that distinguishes Wrightson's drawing from this time, the same feeling of texture.

This is not the kind of display you are likely to find in your local museum, unless you live near one of those institutions that prides itself on surfing the cutting edge. You are more likely to encounter these images at your neighborhood coffee shop, whether corporate or independent, alongside samples of other local art. To see them—to study them—you will have to lean over other patrons at their undersized tables, drawing the irritated

glances of couples clasping hands over their lattes, businessmen flourishing their copies of the *Wall Street Journal* like personal banners. Ignore them.

In the first drawing, Barbara Dinasha, her back to you, stands in front of an unfinished wooden table at which sits a man with the head of a beast. She is wearing a long-sleeved nightdress that descends past her knees; the man has on a soiled black suit and a white dress shirt whose top button is open. Although Barbara's face is not visible, the stiffness of her back, her arms close to her sides, indicate tension; while his face is visible, it is harder to read the expression on the man's animal features, which could be described as those of a wolf but which also suggest both a bull and a goat. Barbara's peach nightdress commands the center of the picture; to either side of the beast-headed man, blue-white semi-abstractions suggest open mouths.

The second drawing shows a hand cradling an apple. Its fingers are slender, their joints slightly enlarged, the thick nails that end them jagged, dirty. Fine hair covers the skin, thickens toward the wrist that extends from a white cuff. The apple is the apotheosis of the fruit: large, perfectly proportioned, its skin shining. The reflection of Barbara Dinasha's face curves over the right side of the apple, foreshortened and distorted by the angle from which the artist has chosen to portray it, but the expression on her features appears to hover somewhere between horror and surprise. Dull yellow, the fingernails are the only color in this piece.

For the third drawing, the artist has turned the paper lengthwise. The Police Chief, in profile from the waist up, is at the left hand edge of the picture. Together, his gun at hip level, his left hand outstretched, his eyes narrowed, suggest a man walking in little light. Behind him runs a wooden wall, the swirling grain of which composes figures twisting upwards, their mouths exaggerated screams. On the wall, a line of trees has been graffitied. Tall, thin, their branches bare, they would be easy to confuse with the writhing forms were it not for the fact that they have been painted. Gray, white, and black, they seem to recede into the paper.

Also done lengthwise, the fourth drawing is the most involved; perhaps this is why the artist has chosen to leave it in black and white. Set in the same space as the first, its left side is taken up by the man with the beast's head. He is in motion, his left leg up and bent, his left foot on the wooden table, his arms out and slightly forward. His suit strains against his arms, his legs.

Its fabric looks more ragged, worn, almost hairy. Lips peeled back from a forest of curved fangs, the beast mouth is open in a snarl you can almost hear. Above, behind the man, the air is turbulent, a chaos of swirls, as if full of something that is expressing itself through this figure. In the center of the picture, Barbara Dinasha is diving to the floor, her eyes shut, her mouth taut, her hands over her head. It is as if she is trying to leap free of the scene in which she has found herself. The picture's right shows the Police Chief, his right arm straight out, braced with his left, his index finger already tightened on the trigger of his gun, which is just about to erupt with fire and noise. Lips drawn back from his teeth, the Police Chief's face is bright with rage. Above, behind him, the air is still, empty.

A single color, a deep, almost luminous red, splashes across the fifth drawing as if some terrific act of violence has burst across it. It's blood, an explosion of it, on the left side of which is the right shoulder of the man with the beast's head, and on the right side of which is the top of his right arm. His back is to you, the coat that looks even more rough, hairy, pierced by three holes surrounded by starbursts of blood. The beast head is thrown back, the eye you can see wide with pain, the mouth gasping at the wound being done to it. Behind him, the Police Chief leans forward and to his left, the pose of a man putting all his force into a throw. His eyes are shaded by the brim of his hat, but his mouth is open, his teeth clenched. Study the drawing and you will discern the fingers of his right hand gripping the right hand of the man with the beast's head.

Drawn from the floor of this space looking up, the final picture shows Barbara Dinasha to the left, leaning against the unfinished wooden table with her right arm. Her nightgown, her hair, are wet with blood. She is not looking at the Police Chief, who stands on the right, bent slightly at the waist, still holding the hand of the man with the beast's head's right arm, the torn end of which rests in a pool of blood on the floor. The arm is sinewy, covered in thick, coarse hair. The Police Chief's uniform is also stained with blood. His eyes do not register Barbara; like hers, they are focused on the object in the drawing's foreground, in its left-hand corner: an apple, only the right side of which is in view. It is impossible to tell whether the apple's skin is undisturbed, or if the white of its flesh shows through a bite. The artist has painted the apple pale green-going-to-red, but that isn't

what causes you to linger on this drawing, ignoring the customers shaking their newspapers at you, edging past you with weighted *Excuse me*s—no, it's the reflection the artist has suggested on the apple's shining skin. It's you.

At first, you aren't sure—actually, you are sure, almost before you realize what you're seeing, but there's no way it could be you, is there? A double-check of the artist's name confirms that you do not know him. Yet there you are; it isn't some quality of the paint making it a mirror. You're in there with Barbara and the Police Chief. And the man with the beast's head, too: he must be in there, even though you can't see him. Well, his body must be. The expression on your face is difficult to read. Is it curiosity? Eagerness? Hunger?

In Paris, in the Mouth of Kronos

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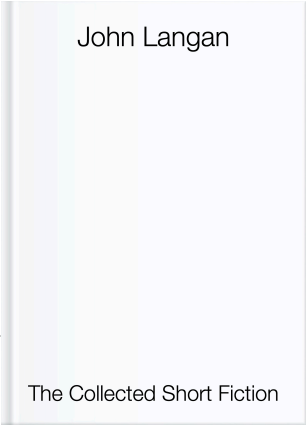

1

"You know how much they want for a Coke?"

"How much?" Vasquez said.

"Five euros. Can you believe that?"

Vasquez shrugged. She knew the gesture would irritate Buchanan, who took an almost pathological delight in complaining about everything in Paris, from the lack of air conditioning on the train ride in from De Gaulle to their narrow hotel rooms; but they had an expense account, after all, and however modest it was, she was sure a five-euro Coke would not deplete it. She didn't imagine the professionals sat around fretting over the cost of their sodas.

To her left, the broad Avenue de la Bourdonnais was surprisingly quiet; to her right, the interior of the restaurant was a din of languages: English mainly, with German, Spanish, Italian, and even a little French mixed in. In front of and behind her, the rest of the sidewalk tables were occupied by an almost even balance of old men reading newspapers and youngish couples wearing sunglasses. Late afternoon sunlight washed over her surroundings like a spill of white paint, lightening everything several shades, reducing the low buildings across the Avenue to hazy rectangles. When their snack was done, she would have to return to one of the souvenir shops they had passed on the walk here and buy a pair of sunglasses. Another expense for Buchanan to complain about.

" M'sieu? Madame?" Their waiter, surprisingly middle-aged, had returned. *" Vous êtes—"*

"You speak English," Buchanan said.

“But of course,” the waiter said. “You are ready with your order?”

“I’ll have a cheeseburger,” Buchanan said. “Medium-rare. And a Coke,” he added with a grimace.

“Very good,” the waiter said. “And for Madame?”

“ *Je voudrais un crêpe de chocolat,”* Vasquez said, “ *et un café au lait.”*

The waiter’s expression did not change. “*Très bien, Madame. Merçi,”* he said as Vasquez passed him their menus.

“A cheeseburger?” she said once he had returned inside the restaurant.

“What?” Buchanan said.

“Never mind.”

“I like cheeseburgers. What’s wrong with that?”

“Nothing. It’s fine.”

“Just because I don’t want to eat some kind of French food—ooh, *un crêpe, s’il vous-plait. ”*

“All this,” Vasquez nodded at their surroundings, “it’s lost on you, isn’t it?”

“We aren’t here for ‘all this,’” Buchanan said. “We’re here for Mr. White.”

Despite herself, Vasquez flinched. “Why don’t you speak a little louder? I’m not sure everyone inside the café heard.”

“You think they know what we’re talking about?”

“That’s not the point.”

“Oh? What is?”

“Operational integrity.”

“Wow. You pick that up from the *Bourne* movies?”

“One person overhears something they don’t like, opens their cellphone and calls the cops—”

“And it’s all a big misunderstanding officers, we were talking about movies, ha-ha.”

“—and the time we lose smoothing things over with them completely fucks up Plowman’s schedule.”

“Stop worrying,” Buchanan said, but Vasquez was pleased to see his face blanch at the prospect of Plowman’s displeasure.

For a few moments Vasquez leaned back in her chair and closed her eyes, the sun lighting the inside of her lids crimson. *I’m here,* she thought, the city’s presence a pressure at the base of her skull, not unlike what she’d felt patrolling the streets of Bagram, but less unpleasant. Buchanan said, “So you’ve been here before.”

“What?” Brightness overwhelmed her vision, simplified Buchanan to a dark silhouette in a baseball cap.

“You *parlez* the *français* pretty well. I figure you must’ve spent some time —what? In college? Some kind of study abroad deal?”

“Nope,” Vasquez said.

“‘Nope’ what?”

“I’ve never been to Paris. Hell, before I enlisted, the farthest I’d ever been from home was the class trip to Washington senior year.”

“You’re shittin’ me.”

“Uh-uh. Don’t get me wrong: I wanted to see Paris, London—everything. But the money—the money wasn’t there. The closest I came to all this were the movies in Madame Antosca’s French 4 class. It was one of the reasons I joined up: I figured I’d see the world and let the Army pay for it.”

“How’d that work out for you?”

“We’re here, aren’t we?”

“Not because of the Army.”

“No, precisely because of the Army. Well,” she said, “them and the spooks.”

“You still think Mr.—oh, sorry—*You-Know-Who* was CIA?”

Frowning, Vasquez lowered her voice. “Who knows? I’m not even sure he was one of ours. That accent… he could’ve been working for the Brits or the Aussies. He could’ve been Russian, back in town to settle a few scores. Wherever he picked up his pronunciation, dude was not regular military.”

“Be funny if *he* was on Stillwater’s payroll.”

“Hysterical,” Vasquez said. “What about you?”

“What about me?”

“I assume this is your first trip to Paris.”

“And there’s where you would be wrong.”

“Now you’re shittin’ me.”

“Why, because I ordered a cheeseburger and a Coke?”

“Among other things, yeah.”

“My senior class trip was a week in Paris and Amsterdam. In college, the end of my sophomore year, my parents took me to France for a month.” At what she knew must be the look on her face, Buchanan added, “It was an attempt at breaking up the relationship I was in at the time.”

“It’s not that. I’m trying to process the thought of you in college.”

“Wow, anyone ever tell you what a laugh riot you are?”

“Did it work—your parents’ plan?”

Buchanan shook his head. “The second I was back in the US, I knocked her up. We were married by the end of the summer.”

“How romantic.”

“Hey.” Buchanan shrugged.

“That why you enlisted—support your new family?”

“More or less. Heidi’s dad owned a bunch of McDonald’s; for the first six months of our marriage, I tried to assistant manage one of them.”

“With your people skills, that must have been a match made in heaven.”

The retort forming on Buchanan’s lips was cut short by the reappearance of their waiter, encumbered with their drinks and their food. He set their plates before them with a “*Madame”* and “*M’sieu,”* then, as he was distributing their drinks, said, “Everything is okay? *Ça va?”*

“ *Oui,”* Vasquez said. “ *C’est bon. Merçi.”*

With the slightest of bows, the waiter left them to their food.

While Buchanan worked his hands around his cheeseburger, Vasquez said, “I don’t think I realized you were married.”

“ *Were,”* Buchanan said. “She wasn’t happy about my deploying in the first place, and when the shit hit the fan…” He bit into the burger. Through a

mouthful of bun and meat he said, “The court-martial was the excuse she needed. Couldn’t handle the shame, she said. The humiliation of being married to one of the guards who’d tortured an innocent man to death. What kind of role model would I be for our son?

“I tried—I tried to tell her it wasn’t like that. It wasn’t that—you know what I’m talking about.”

Vasquez studied her neatly folded crêpe. “Yeah.” Mr. White had favored a flint knife for what he called *the delicate work*.

“If that’s what she wants, fine, fuck her. But she made it so I can’t see my son. The second she decided we were splitting up, there was her dad with money for a lawyer. I get a call from this asshole—this is right in the middle of the court-martial—and he tells me Heidi’s filing for divorce—no surprise—and they’re going to make it easy for me: no alimony, no child support, nothing. The only catch is, I have to sign away all my rights to Sam. If I don’t, they’re fully prepared to go to court, and how do I like my chances in front of a judge? What choice did I have?”

Vasquez tasted her coffee. She saw her mother, holding open the front door for her, unable to meet her eyes.

“Bad enough about that poor bastard who died—what was his name? If there’s one thing you’d think I’d know…”

“Mahbub Ali,” Vasquez said. *What kind of a person are you?* her father had shouted. *What kind of person is part of such things?*

“Mahbub Ali,” Buchanan said. “Bad enough what happened to him; I just wish I’d know what was happening to the rest of us, as well.”

They ate the rest of their meal in silence. When the waiter returned to ask if they wanted dessert, they declined.

2

Vasquez had compiled a list of reasons for crossing the Avenue and walking to the Eiffel Tower, from *It’s an open, crowded space: it’s a better place to review the plan’s details* to *I want to see the fucking Eiffel Tower once before I die, okay?* But Buchanan agreed to her proposal without argument; nor did he complain about the fifteen euros she spent on a pair of

sunglasses on the walk there. Did she need to ask to know he was back in the concrete room they'd called the Closet, its air full of the stink of fear and piss?

Herself, she was doing her best not to think about the chamber under the prison's sub-basement Just-Call-Me-Bill had taken her to. This was maybe a week after the tall, portly man she knew for a fact was CIA had started spending every waking moment with Mr. White. Vasquez had followed Bill down poured concrete stairs that led from the labyrinth of the basement and its handful of high-value captives in their scattered cells (not to mention the Closet, whose precise location she'd been unable to fix), to the sub-basement, where he had clicked on the large yellow flashlight he was carrying. Its beam had ranged over brick walls, an assortment of junk (some of it Soviet-era aircraft parts, some of it tools to repair those parts, some of it more recent: stacks of toilet paper, boxes of plastic cutlery, a pair of hospital gurneys). They had made their way through that place to a low doorway that opened on carved stone steps whose curved surfaces testified to the passage of generations of feet. All the time, Just-Call-Me-Bill had been talking, lecturing, detailing the history of the prison, from its time as a repair center for the aircraft the Soviets flew in and out of here, until some KGB officer decided the building was perfect for housing prisoners, a change everyone who subsequently held possession of it had maintained. Vasquez had struggled to pay attention, especially as they had descended the last set of stairs and the air grew warm, moist, the rock to either side of her damp. *Before,* the CIA operative was saying, *oh, before. Did you know a detachment of Alexander the Great's army stopped here? One man returned.*

The stairs had ended in a wide, circular area. The roof was flat and low, the walls no more than shadowy suggestions. Just-Call-Me-Bill's flashlight had roamed the floor, picked out a symbol incised in the rock at their feet: a rough circle, the diameter of a manhole cover, broken at about eight o'clock. Its circumference was stained black, its interior a map of dark brown splotches. *Hold this,* he had said, passing her the flashlight, which had occupied her for the two or three seconds it took him to remove a plastic baggie from one of the pockets of his safari vest. When Vasquez had directed the light at him, he was dumping the bag's contents in his right

hand, tugging at the plastic with his left to pull it away from the dull red wad. The stink of blood and meat on the turn had made her step back. *Steady, specialist*. The bag's contents had landed inside the broken circle with a heavy, wet smack. Vasquez had done her best not to study it too closely.

A sound, the scrape of bare flesh dragging over stone, from behind and to her left, had spun Vasquez around, the flashlight held out to blind, her sidearm freed and following the light's path. This section of the curving wall opened in a black arch like the top of an enormous throat. For a moment, that space had been full of a great, pale figure. Vasquez had had a confused impression of hands large as tires grasping either side of the arch, a boulder of a head, its mouth gaping amidst a frenzy of beard, its eyes vast, idiot. It was scrambling towards her; she didn't know where to aim—

And then Mr. White had been standing in the archway, dressed in the white linen suit that somehow always seemed stained, even though no discoloration was visible on any of it. He had not blinked at the flashlight beam stabbing his face; nor had he appeared to judge Vasquez's gun pointing at him of much concern. Muttering an apology, Vasquez had lowered gun and light immediately. Mr. White had ignored her, strolling across the round chamber to the foot of the stairs, which he had climbed quickly. Just-Call-Me-Bill had hurried after, a look on his bland face that Vasquez took for amusement. She had brought up the rear, sweeping the flashlight over the floor as she reached the lowest step. The broken circle had been empty, except for a red smear that shone in the light.

That she had momentarily hallucinated, Vasquez had not once doubted. Things with Mr. White already had raced past what even Just-Call-Me-Bill had shown them, and however effective his methods, Vasquez was afraid that she—that they all had finally gone too far, crossed over into truly bad territory. Combined with a mild claustrophobia, that had caused her to fill the dark space with a nightmare. However reasonable that explanation, the shape with which her mind had replaced Mr. White had plagued her. Had she seen the Devil stepping forward on his goat's feet, one red hand using his pitchfork to balance himself, it would have made more sense than that giant form. It was as if her subconscious was telling her more about Mr. White than she understood. Prior to that trip, Vasquez had not been at ease

around the man who never seemed to speak so much as to have spoken, so that you knew what he'd said even though you couldn't remember hearing him saying it. Afterward, she gave him a still wider berth.

Ahead, the Eiffel Tower swept up into the sky. Vasquez had seen it from a distance, at different points along hers and Buchanan's journey from their hotel toward the Seine, but the closer she drew to it, the less real it seemed. It was as if the very solidity of the beams and girders weaving together were evidence of their falseness. *I am seeing the Eiffel Tower,* she told herself. *I am actually looking at the goddamn Eiffel Tower.*

"Here you are," Buchanan said. "Happy?"

"Something like that."

The great square under the Tower was full of tourists, from the sound of it, the majority of them groups of Americans and Italians. Nervous men wearing untucked shirts over their jeans flitted from group to group—street vendors, Vasquez realized, each one carrying an oversized ring strung with metal replicas of the Tower. A pair of gendarmes, their hands draped over the machine guns slung high on their chests, let their eyes roam the crowd while they carried on a conversation. In front of each of the Tower's legs, lines of people waiting for the chance to ascend it doubled and redoubled back on themselves, enormous fans misting water over them. Taking Buchanan's arm, Vasquez steered them toward the nearest fan. Eyebrows raised, he tilted his head toward her.

"Ambient noise," she said.

"Whatever."

Once they were close enough to the fan's propeller drone, Vasquez leaned into Buchanan. "Go with this," she said.

"You're the boss." Buchanan gazed up, a man debating whether he wanted to climb *that* high.

"I've been thinking," Vasquez said. "Plowman's plan's shit."

"Oh?" He pointed at the Tower's first level, three hundred feet above.

Nodding, Vasquez said, "We approach Mr. White, and he's just going to agree to come with us to the elevator."

Buchanan dropped his hand. “Well, we do have our… persuaders. How do you like that? Was it cryptic enough? Or should I have said ‘guns’?”

Vasquez smiled as if Buchanan had uttered an endearing remark. “You really think Mr. White is going to be impressed by a pair of .22s?”

“A bullet’s a bullet. Besides,” Buchanan returned her smile, “isn’t the plan for us not to have to use the guns? Aren’t we relying on him remembering us?”

“It’s not like we were BFFs. If it were me, and I wanted the guy, and I had access to Stillwater’s resources, I wouldn’t be wasting my time on a couple of convicted criminals. I’d put together a team and go get him. Besides, twenty grand a piece for catching up to someone outside his hotel room, passing a couple of words with him, then escorting him to an elevator: tell me that doesn’t sound too good to be true.”

“You know the way these big companies work: they’re all about throwing money around. Your problem is, you’re still thinking like a soldier.”

“Even so, why spend it on us?”

“Maybe Plowman feels bad about everything. Maybe this is his way of making it up to us.”

“Plowman? Seriously?”

Buchanan shook his head. “This isn’t that complicated.”

Vasquez closed her eyes. “Humor me.” She leaned her head against Buchanan’s chest.

“What have I been doing?”

“We’re a feint. While we’re distracting Mr. White, Plowman’s up to something else.”

“Like?”

“Maybe Mr. White has something in his room; maybe we’re occupying him while Plowman’s retrieving it.”

“You know there are easier ways for Plowman to steal something.”

“Maybe we’re keeping Mr. White in place so Plowman can pull a hit on him.”

“Again, there are simpler ways to do that that would have nothing to do with us. You knock on the guy’s door, he opens it, pow.”

“What if we’re supposed to get caught in the crossfire?”

“You bring us all the way here just to kill us?”

“Didn’t you say big companies like to spend money?”

“But why take us out in the first place?”

Vasquez raised her head and opened her eyes. “How many of the people who knew Mr. White are still in circulation?”

“There’s Just-Call-Me-Bill—”

“You think. He’s CIA. We don’t know what happened to him.”

“Okay. There’s you, me, Plowman—”

“Go on.”

Buchanan paused, reviewing, Vasquez knew, the fates of the three other guards who’d assisted Mr. White with his work in the Closet. Long before news had broken about Mahbub Ali’s death, Lavalle had sat on the edge of his bunk, placed his gun in his mouth, and squeezed the trigger. Then, when the shitstorm had started, Maxwell, on patrol, had been stabbed in the neck by an insurgent who’d targeted only him. Finally, in the holding cell awaiting his court-martial, Ruiz had taken advantage of a lapse in his jailers’ attention to strip off his pants, twist them into a rope, and hang himself from the top bunk of his cell’s bunkbed. His guards had cut him down in time to save his life, but Ruiz had deprived his brain of oxygen for sufficient time to leave him a vegetable. When Buchanan spoke, he said, “Coincidence.”

“Or conspiracy.”

“Goddammit.” Buchanan pulled free of Vasquez and headed for the long, rectangular park that stretched behind the Tower, speedwalking. His legs were sufficiently long that she had to jog to catch up to him. Buchanan did not slacken his pace, continuing his straight line up the middle of the park, through the midst of bemused picnickers. “Jesus Christ,” Vasquez called, “will you slow down?”

He would not. Heedless of oncoming traffic, Buchanan led her across a pair of roads that traversed the park. Horns blaring, tires screaming, cars swerved around them. *At this rate,* Vasquez thought, *Plowman's motives won't matter.* Once they were safely on the grass again, she sped up until she was beside him, then reached high on the underside of Buchanan's right arm, not far from the armpit, and pinched as hard as she could.

"Ow! Shit!" Yanking his arm up and away, Buchanan stopped. Rubbing his skin, he said, "What the hell, Vasquez?"

"What the hell are you doing?"

"Walking. What did it look like?"

"Running away."

"Fuck you."

"Fuck you, you candy-ass pussy."

Buchanan's eyes flared.

"I'm trying to work this shit out so we can stay alive. You're so concerned about seeing your son, maybe you'd want to help me."

"Why are you doing this?" Buchanan said. "Why are you fucking with my head? Why are you trying to fuck this up?"

"I'm—"

"There's nothing to work out. We've got a job to do; we do it; we get the rest of our money. We do the job well, there's a chance Stillwater'll add us to their payroll. That happens—I'm making that kind of money—I hire myself a pit-bull of a lawyer and sic him on fucking Heidi. You want to live in goddamn Paris, you can eat a croissant for breakfast every morning."

"You honestly believe that."

"Yes I do."

Vasquez held his gaze, but who was she kidding? She could count on one finger the number of stare-downs she'd won. Her arms, legs, everything felt suddenly, incredibly heavy. She looked at her watch. "Come on," she said, starting in the direction of the Avenue de la Bourdonnais. "We can catch a cab."

3

Plowman had insisted they meet him at an airport café before they set foot outside de Gaulle. At the end of those ten minutes, which had consisted of Plowman asking details of their flight and instructing them how to take the RUR to the Metro to the stop nearest their hotel, he had passed Vasquez a card for a restaurant, where, he had said, the three of them would reconvene at 3:00 p.m. local time to review the evening's plans. Vasquez had been relieved to see Plowman seated at a table outside the café. Despite the ten thousand dollars gathering interest in her checking account, the plane ticket that had been fedexed to her apartment, followed by the receipt for four nights' stay at the Hôtel Resnais, she had been unable to shake the sense that none of this was as it appeared, that it was the set-up to an elaborate joke whose punchline would come at her expense. Plowman's solid form, dressed in a black suit whose tailored lines announced the upward shift in his pay grade, had confirmed that everything he had told her the afternoon he had sought her out at Andersen's farm had been true.

Or true enough to quiet momentarily the misgivings that had whispered ever louder in her ears the last two weeks, to the point that she had held her cell open in her left hand and the piece of paper with Plowman's number on it in her right, ready to call him and say she was out, he could have his money back, she hadn't spent any of it. During the long, hot train ride from the airport to the Metro station, when Buchanan had complained about Plowman not letting them out of his sight, treating them like goddamn kids, Vasquez had found an explanation on her lips. *It's probably the first time he's run an operation like this,* she had said. *He wants to be sure he dots all his i's and crosses all his t's.* Buchanan had harrumphed, but it was true: Plowman obsessed over the minutiae; it was one of the reasons he'd been in charge of their detail at the prison. Until the shit had buried the fan, that attentiveness had seemed to forecast his steady climb up the chain of command. At his court-martial, however, his enthusiasm for exact strikes on prisoner nerve clusters, his precision in placing arm restraints so that a prisoner's shoulders would not dislocate when he was hoisted off the floor by his bonds, his speed in obtaining the various surgical and dental instruments Just-Call-Me-Bill requested, had been counted liabilities rather

than assets, and he had been the only one of their group to serve substantial time at Leavenworth—ten months.

Still, the Walther Vasquez had requested had been waiting where Plowman had promised it would be, wrapped with an extra clip in a waterproof bag secured inside the tank of her hotel room's toilet. A thorough inspection had reassured her that all was in order with the gun, its ammunition. If he were setting her up, would Plowman have wanted to arm her? Her proficiency at the target range had been well known, and while she hadn't touched a gun since her discharge, she had no doubts of her ability. Tucked within the back of her jeans, draped by her blouse, the pistol was easily accessible.

That's assuming, of course, that Plowman's even there tonight. But the caution was a formality. Plowman being Plowman, there was no way he was not going to be at Mr. White's hotel. Was there any need for him to have made the trip to West Virginia, to have tracked her to Anderson's farm, to have sought her out in the far barns, where she'd been using a high-pressure hose to sluice pigshit into gutters? An email, a phone call would have sufficed. Such methods, however, would have left too much outside Plowman's immediate control, and since he appeared able to dunk his bucket into a well of cash deeper than any she'd known, he had decided to find Vasquez and speak to her directly. (He'd done the same with Buchanan, she'd learned on the flight over, tracking him to the suburb of Chicago where he'd been shift manager at a Hardee's.) If the man had gone to such lengths to persuade them to take the job, if he had been there to meet them at Charles de Gaulle and was waiting for them even now, as their taxi crossed the Seine and headed toward the Champs Elysées, was there any chance he wouldn't be present later on?

Of course, he wouldn't be alone. Plowman would have the reassurance of God-only-knew-how-many Stillwater employees, which was to say, mercenaries (no doubt heavily armed and armored) backing him up. Vasquez hadn't had much to do with the company's personnel; they tended to roost closer to the center of Kabul, where the high-value targets they guarded huddled. Iraq: that was where Stillwater's bootprint was the deepest; from what Vasquez had heard, the former soldiers riding the reinforced Lincoln Navigators through Baghdad not only made about five times what they had in the military, they followed rules of engagement that

were, to put it mildly, less robust. While Paris was as far east as she was willing to travel, she had to admit, the prospect of that kind of money made Baghdad, if not appealing, at least less unappealing.

And what would Dad have to say to that? No matter that his eyes were failing, the center of his vision consumed by macular degeneration, her father had lost none of his passion for the news, employing a standing magnifier to aid him as he pored over the day's *New York Times* and *Washington Post*, sitting in his favorite chair listening to *All Things Considered* on WVPN, even venturing online to the BBC using the computer whose monitor settings she had adjusted for him before she'd deployed. Her father would not have missed the reports of Stillwater's involvement in several incidents in Iraq that were less shootouts than turkey-shoots, not to mention the ongoing Congressional inquiry into their policing of certain districts of post-Katrina and Rita New Orleans, as well as an event in upstate New York last summer when one of their employees had taken a camping trip that had left two of his three companions dead under what could best be described as suspicious circumstances. She could hear his words, heavy with the accent that had accreted as he'd aged: *Was this why I suffered in the Villa Grimaldi? So my daughter could join the* Caravana de la Muerte? The same question he'd asked her the first night she'd returned home.

All the same, it wasn't as if his opinion of her was going to drop any further. *If I'm damned*, she thought, *I might as well get paid for it.*

That said, she was in no hurry to certify her ultimate destination, which returned her to the problem of Plowman and his plan. You would have expected the press of the .22 against the small of her back to have been reassuring, but instead, it only emphasized her sense of powerlessness, as if Plowman were so confident, so secure, he could allow her whatever firearm she wanted.

The cab turned onto the Champs Elysées. Ahead, the Arc de Triomphe squatted in the distance. Another monument to cross off the list.

The restaurant whose card Plowman had handed her was located on one of the side streets about halfway to the Arc; Vasquez and Buchanan departed their cab at the street's corner and walked the hundred yards to a door flanked by man-sized plaster Chinese dragons. Buchanan brushed past the black-suited host and his welcome. Smiling and murmuring, "*Pardonnez, nous avons un rendezvous içi,"* Vasquez pursued him into the dim interior. Up a short flight of stairs, Buchanan strode across a floor that glowed with pale light—glass, Vasquez saw, thick squares suspended over shimmering aquamarine. A carp the size of her forearm darted underneath her, and she realized that she was standing on top of an enormous, shallow fish tank, brown and white and orange carp racing one another across its bottom, jostling the occasional slower turtle. With one exception, the tables supported by the glass were empty. Too late, Vasquez supposed, for lunch, and too early for dinner. Or maybe the food here wasn't that good.

His back to the far wall, Plowman was seated at a table directly in front of her. Already, Buchanan was lowering himself into a chair opposite him. *Stupid,* Vasquez thought at the expanse of his unguarded back. Her boots clacked on the glass. She moved around the table to sit beside Plowman, who had exchanged the dark suit in which he'd greeted them at de Gaulle for a tan jacket over a cream shirt and slacks. His outfit caught the light filtering from below them and held it in as a dull sheen. A metal bowl filled with dumplings was centered on the tablemat before him; to its right, a slice of lemon floated at the top of a glass of clear liquid. Plowman's eyebrow raised as she settled beside him, but he did not comment on her choice; instead, he said, "You're here."

Vasquez's "Yes" was overridden by Buchanan's "We are, and there are some things we need cleared up."

Vasquez stared at him. Plowman said, "Oh?"

"That's right," Buchanan said. "We've been thinking, and this plan of yours doesn't add up."

"Really." The tone of Plowman's voice did not change.

"Really," Buchanan nodded.

"Would you care to explain to me exactly how it doesn't add up?"

“You expect Vasquez and me to believe you spent all this money so the two of us can have a five-minute conversation with Mr. White?”

Vasquez flinched.

“There’s a little bit more to it than that.”

“We’re supposed to persuade him to walk twenty feet with us to an elevator.”

“Actually, it’s seventy-four feet three inches.”

“Whatever.” Buchanan glanced at Vasquez. She looked away. To the wall to her right, water chuckled down a series of small rock terraces through an opening in the floor into the fish tank.

“No, not ‘whatever,’ Buchanan. Seventy-four feet, three inches,” Plowman said. “This is why the biggest responsibility you confront each day is lifting the fry basket out of the hot oil when the buzzer tells you to. You don’t pay attention to the little things.”

The host was standing at Buchanan’s elbow, his hands clasped over a pair of long menus. Plowman nodded at him and he passed the menus to Vasquez and Buchanan. Inclining toward them, the host said, “May I bring you drinks while you decide your order?”

His eyes on the menu, Buchanan said, “Water.”

“ *Moi aussi,”* Vasquez said. “ *Merçi.”*

“Nice accent,” Plowman said when the host had left.

“Thanks.”

“I don’t think I realized you speak French.”

Vasquez shrugged. “Wasn’t any call for it, was there?”

“Anything else?” Plowman said. “Spanish?”

“I understand more than I can speak.”

“You folks were from—where, again?”

“Chile,” Vasquez said. “My dad. My mom’s American, but her parents were from Argentina.”

“That’s useful to know.”

“For when Stillwater hires her,” Buchanan said.

“Yes,” Plowman answered. “The company has projects under way in a number of places where fluency in French and Spanish would be an asset.”

“Such as?”

“One thing at a time,” Plowman said. “Let’s get through tonight first, and then you can worry about your next assignment.”

“And what’s that going to be,” Buchanan said, “another twenty K to walk someone to an elevator?”

“I doubt it’ll be anything so mundane,” Plowman said. “I also doubt it’ll pay as little as twenty thousand.”

“Look,” Vasquez started to say, but the host had returned with their water. Once he deposited their glasses on the table, he withdrew a pad and pen from his jacket pocket and took Buchanan’s order of crispy duck and Vasquez’s of steamed dumplings. After he had retrieved the menus and gone, Plowman turned to Vasquez and said, “You were saying?”

“It’s just—what Buchanan’s trying to say is, it’s a lot, you know? If you’d offered us, I don’t know, say five hundred bucks apiece to come here and play escort, that still would’ve been a lot, but it wouldn’t—I mean, *twenty thousand dollars,* plus the air fare, the hotel, the expense account. It seems too much for what you’re asking us to do. Can you understand that?”

Plowman shook his head yes. “I can. I can understand how strange it might appear to offer this kind of money for this length of service, but…” He raised his drink to his lips. When he lowered his arm, the glass was half drained. “Mr. White is… to say he’s high-value doesn’t begin to cover it. The guy’s been around—he’s been around. Talk about a font of information: the stuff this guy’s forgotten would be enough for a dozen careers. What he remembers will give whoever can get him to share it with them permanent tactical advantage.”

“No such thing,” Buchanan said. “No matter how much the guy says he knows—”

“Yes, yes,” Plowman held up his hand like a traffic cop. “Trust me. He’s high-value.”

“But won’t the spooks—What does Just-Call-Me-Bill have to say about this?” Vasquez said.

“Bill’s dead.”

Simultaneously Buchanan said, “Huh,” and Vasquez, “What? How?”

“I don’t know. When my bosses greenlighted me for this, Bill was the first person I thought of. I wasn’t sure if he was still with the Agency, so I did some checking around. I couldn’t find out much—goddamn spooks keep their mouths shut—but I was able to determine that Bill was dead. It sounded like it might’ve been that chopper crash in Helmand, but that’s a guess. To answer your question, Vasquez, Bill didn’t have a whole lot to say.”

“Shit,” Buchanan said.

“Okay,” Vasquez exhaled. “Okay. Was he the only one who knew about Mr. White?”

“I find it hard to believe he was,” Plowman said, “but thus far, no one’s nibbled at any of the bait I’ve left out. I’m surprised: I’ll admit it. But it makes our job that much simpler, so I’m not complaining.”

“All right,” Vasquez said, “but the money—”

His eyes alight, Plowman leaned forward. “To get my hands on Mr. White, I would have paid each of you ten times as much. That’s how important this operation is. Whatever we have to shell out now is nothing compared to what we’re going to gain from this guy.”

“Now you tell us,” Buchanan said.

Plowman smiled and relaxed back. “Well, the bean counters do appreciate it when you can control costs.” He turned to Vasquez. “Well? Have your concerns been addressed?”

“Hey,” Buchanan said, “I was the one asking the questions.”

“Please,” Plowman said. “I was in charge of you, remember? Whatever your virtues, Buchanan, original thought is not among them.”

“What about Mr. White?” Vasquez said. “Suppose he doesn’t want to come with you?”

“I don’t imagine he will,” Plowman said. “Nor do I expect him to be terribly interested in assisting us once he is in our custody. That’s okay.” Plowman picked up one of the chopsticks alongside his plate, turned it in

his hand, and jabbed it into a dumpling. He lifted the dumpling to his mouth; momentarily, Vasquez pictured a giant bringing its teeth together on a human head. While he chewed, Plowman said, “To be honest, I hope the son of a bitch is feeling especially stubborn. Because of him, I lost everything that was good in my life. Because of that fucker, I did time in prison—fucking *prison*.” Plowman swallowed, speared another dumpling. “Believe me when I say Mr. White and I have a lot of quality time coming.”

Beneath them, a half-dozen carp that had been floating lazily, scattered.

5

Buchanan was all for finding Mr. White’s hotel and parking themselves in its lobby. “What?” Vasquez said. “Behind a couple of newspapers?” Stuck in traffic on what should have been its short way to the Concorde Opera, where Mr. White had the junior suite, their cab was full of the reek of exhaust, the low rumble of the cars surrounding them.

“Sure, yeah, that’d work.”

“Jesus—and I’m the one who’s seen too many movies?”

“What?” Buchanan said.

“Number one, at this rate, it’ll be at least six before we get there. How many people sit around reading the day’s paper at night? The whole point of the news is, it’s new.”

“Maybe we’re on vacation.”

“Doesn’t matter. We’ll still stick out. And number two, even if the lobby’s full of tourists holding newspapers up in front of their faces, Plowman’s plan doesn’t kick in until eleven. You telling me no one’s going to notice the same two people sitting there, doing the same thing, for five hours? For all we know, Mr. White’ll see us on his way out and coming back.”

“Once again, Vasquez, you’re overthinking this. People don’t see what they don’t expect to see. Mr. White isn’t expecting us in the lobby of his plush hotel, ergo, he won’t notice us there.”

“Are you kidding? This isn’t ‘people’: this is Mr. White.”

“Get a grip. He eats, shits, and sleeps same as you and me.”

For the briefest of instants, the window over Buchanan's shoulder was full of the enormous face Vasquez had glimpsed (hallucinated) in the caves under the prison. Not for the first time, she was struck by the crudeness of the features, as if a sculptor had hurriedly struck out the approximation of a human visage on a piece of rock already formed to suggest it.

Taking her silence as further disagreement, Buchanan sighed and said, "All right. Tell you what: a big, tony hotel, there's gotta be all kinds of stores around it, right? Long as we don't go too far, we'll do some shopping."

"Fine," Vasquez said. When Buchanan had settled back in his seat, she said, "So. You satisfied with Plowman's answers?"

"Aw, no, not this again…"

"I'm just asking a question."

"No, what you're asking is called a leading question, as in, leading me to think that Plowman didn't really say anything to us, and we don't know anything more now than we did before our meeting."

"You learned something from that?"

Buchanan nodded. "You bet I did. I learned that Plowman has a hard-on for Mr. White the size of your fucking Eiffel Tower, from which I deduce that anyone who helps him satisfy himself stands to benefit enormously." As the cab lurched forward, Buchanan said, "Am I wrong?"

"No," Vasquez said. "It's—"

"What? What is it now?"

"I don't know." She looked out her window at the cars creeping along beside them.

"Well, that's helpful."

"Forget it."

For once Buchanan chose not to pursue the argument. Beyond the car to their right, Vasquez watched men and women walking past the windows of ground-level businesses, tech stores and clothing stores and a bookstore and an office whose purpose she could not identify. Over their wrought-iron balconies, the windows of the apartments above showed the late afternoon sky, its blue deeper, as if hardened by a day of the sun's baking. *Because of*

him, I lost everything that was good in my life. Because of that fucker, I did time in prison—fucking prison. Plowman's declaration sounded in her ears. Insofar as the passion on his face authenticated his words, and hence the purpose of their mission, his brief monologue should have been reassuring. And yet, and yet…

In the moment before he drove his fist into a prisoner's solar plexus, Plowman's features, distorted and red from the last hour's interrogation, would relax. The effect was startling, as if a layer of heavy makeup had melted off his skin. In the subsequent stillness of his face, Vasquez initially had read Plowman's actual emotion, a clinical detachment from the pain he was preparing to inflict that was based in his utter contempt for the man standing in front of him. While his mouth would stretch with his screams to the prisoner to *Get up! Get the fuck up!* in the second after his blow had dropped the man to the concrete floor, and while his mouth and eyes would continue to express the violence his fists and boots were concentrating on the prisoner's back, his balls, his throat, there would be other moments, impossible to predict, when, as he was shuffle-stepping away from a kick to the prisoner's kidney, Plowman's face would slip into that non-expression and Vasquez would think that she had seen through to the real man.

Then, the week after Plowman had brought Vasquez on board what he had named the White Detail, she'd found herself sitting through a Steven Seagal double-feature—not her first or even tenth choice for a way to pass three hours, but it beat lying on her bunk thinking, *Why are you so shocked? You knew what Plowman was up to—everyone knows.* An hour into *The Patriot,* the vague sensation that had been nagging at her from Seagal's first scene crystallized into recognition: that the blank look with which the actor met every ebb and flow in the drama was the same as the one that Vasquez had caught on Plowman's face, was, she understood, its original. For the remainder of that film and the duration of the next (*Belly of the Beast*), Vasquez had stared at the undersized screen in a kind of horrified fascination, unable to decide which was worse: to be serving under a man whose affect suggested a sociopath, or to be serving under a man who was playing the lead role in a private movie.

How many days after that had Just-Call-Me-Bill arrived? No more than two, she was reasonably sure. He had come, he told the White Detail,

because their efforts with particularly *recalcitrant* prisoners had not gone unnoticed, and his superiors judged it would be beneficial for him to share his knowledge of enhanced interrogation techniques with them—and no doubt, they had some things to teach him. His back ramrod straight, his face alight, Plowman had barked his enthusiasm for their collaboration.

After that, it had been learning the restraints that would cause the prisoner maximum discomfort, expose him (or occasionally, her) to optimum harm. It was hoisting the prisoner off the ground first without dislocating his shoulders, then with. Waterboarding, yes, together with the repurposing of all manner of daily objects, from nail files to pliers to dental floss. Each case was different. Of course you couldn't believe any of the things the prisoners said when they were turned over to you, their protestations of innocence. But even after it appeared you'd broken them, you couldn't be sure they weren't engaged in a more subtle deception, acting as if you'd succeeded in order to preserve the truly valuable information. For this reason, it was necessary to keep the interrogation open, to continue to revisit those prisoners who swore they'd told you everything they knew. *These people are not like you and me,* Just-Call-Me-Bill had said, confirming the impression that had dogged Vasquez when she'd walked patrol, past women draped in white or slate *burqas,* men whose *pokool* proclaimed their loyalty to the *mujahideen*. *These are not a reasonable people. You cannot sit down and talk to them,* Bill went on, *come to an understanding with them. They would rather fly an airplane into a building full of innocent women and men. They would rather strap a bomb to their daughter and send her to give you a hug. They get their hands on a nuke, and there'll be a mushroom cloud where Manhattan used to be. What they understand is pain. Enough suffering, and their tongues will loosen.*

Vasquez could not pin down the exact moment Mr. White had joined their group. When he had shouldered his way past Lavalle and Maxwell, his left hand up to stop Plowman from tilting the prisoner backwards, Just-Call-Me-Bill from pouring the water onto the man's hooded face, she had thought, *Who the hell?* And, as quickly, *Oh—Mr. White*. He must have been with them for some time for Plowman to upright the prisoner, Bill to lower the bucket and step back. The flint knife in his right hand, its edge so fine

you could feel it pressing against your bare skin, had not been unexpected. Nor had what had followed.

It was Mr. White who had suggested they transfer their operations to the Closet, a recommendation Just-Call-Me-Bill had been happy to embrace. Plowman, at first, had been noncommittal. Mr. White's… call it his taking a more active hand in their interrogations, had led to him and Bill spending increased time together. Ruiz had asked the CIA man what he was doing with the man whose suit, while seemingly filthy, was never touched by any of the blood that slicked his knife, his hands. *Education,* Just-Call-Me-Bill had answered. *Our friend is teaching me all manner of things.*

As he was instructing the rest of them, albeit in more indirect fashion. Vasquez had learned that her father's stories of the Villa Grimaldi—which he had withheld from her until she was fifteen, when over the course of the evening after her birthday she had been first incredulous, then horrified, then filled with righteous fury on his behalf—had little bearing on her duties in the Closet. Her father had been an innocent man, a poet, for God's sake, picked up by Pinochet's *Caravana de la Muerte* because they were engaged in a program of terrorizing their own populace. The men (and occasional women) at whose interrogations she assisted were terrorists themselves, spiritual kin to the officers who had scarred her father's arms, his chest, his back, his thighs, who had scored his mind with nightmares from which he still woke screaming, decades later. They were not like you and me, and that difference authorized and legitimized whatever was required to start them talking.

By the time Mahbub Ali was hauled into the Closet, Vasquez had learned other things, too. She had learned that it was possible to concentrate pain on a single part of the body, to the point that the prisoner grew to hate that part of himself for the agony focused there. She had learned that it was preferable to work slowly, methodically—religiously was how she thought of it, though this was no religion to which she'd ever been exposed. This was a faith rooted in the most fundamental truth Mr. White taught her, taught them all, namely, that the flesh yearns for the knife, aches for the cut that will open it, relieve it of its quivering anticipation of harm. As junior member of the Detail, she had not yet progressed to being allowed to work on the prisoners directly, but it didn't matter. While she and Buchanan

sliced away a prisoner's clothes, exposed bare skin, what she saw there—a fragility, a vulnerability whose thick, salty taste filled her mouth—confirmed all Mr. White's lessons, every last one.

Nor was she his best student. That had been Plowman, the only one of them to whom Mr. White had entrusted his flint knife. With Just-Call-Me-Bill, Mr. White had maintained the air of a senior colleague; with the rest of them, he acted as if they were mannequins, placeholders. With Plowman, though, Mr. White was the mentor, the last practitioner of an otherwise dead art passing his knowledge on to his chosen successor. It might have been the plot of a Steven Seagal film. And no Hollywood star could have played the eager apprentice with more enthusiasm than Plowman. While the official cause of Mahbub Ali's death was sepsis resulting from improperly tended wounds, those missing pieces of the man had been parted from him on the edge of Mr. White's stone blade, gripped in Plowman's steady hand.

6

Even with the clotted traffic, the cab drew up in front of the Concorde Opera's three sets of polished wooden doors with close to five hours to spare. While Vasquez settled with the driver, Buchanan stepped out of the cab, crossed the sidewalk, strode up three stairs, and passed through the center doors. The act distracted her enough that she forgot to ask for a receipt; by the time she remembered, the cab had accepted a trio of middle-aged women, their arms crowded with shopping bags, and pulled away. She considered chasing after it, before deciding that she could absorb the ten euros. She turned to the hotel to see the center doors open again, Buchanan standing in them next to a young man with a shaved head who was wearing navy pants and a cream tunic on whose upper left side a name tag flashed. The young man pointed across the street in front of the hotel and waved his hand back and forth, all the while talking to Buchanan, who nodded attentively. When the young man lowered his arm, Buchanan clapped him on the back, thanked him, and descended to Vasquez.

She said, "What was that about?"

"Shopping," Buchanan said. "Come on."

The next fifteen minutes consisted of them walking a route Vasquez wasn't sure she could retrace, through clouds of slow-moving tourists stopping to admire some building or piece of public statuary; alongside briskly moving men and women whose ignoring those same sights marked them as locals as much as their chic haircuts and the rapid-fire French they delivered to their cellphones; past upscale boutiques and the gated entrances to equally upscale apartments. Buchanan's route brought the two of them to a large, corner building whose long windows displayed teddy bears, model planes, dollhouses. Vasquez said, "A toy store?"

"Not just 'a' toy store," Buchanan said. "This is *the* toy store. Supposed to have all kinds of stuff in it."

"For your son."

"Duh."

Inside, a crowd of weary adults and overexcited children moved up and down the store's aisles, past a mix of toys Vasquez recognized (Playmobil, groups of army vehicles, a typical assortment of stuffed animals) and others she'd never seen before (animal-headed figures she realized were Egyptian gods, replicas of round-faced cartoon characters she didn't know, a box of a dozen figurines arranged around a cardboard mountain). Buchanan wandered up to her as she was considering this set, the box propped on her hip. "Cool," he said, leaning forward. "What is it, like, the Greek gods?"

Vasquez resisted a sarcastic remark about the breadth of his knowledge; instead, she said, "Yeah. That's Zeus and his crew at the top of the mountain. I'm not sure who those guys are climbing it…"

"Titans," Buchanan said. "They were monsters who came before the gods, these kind of primal forces. Zeus defeated them, imprisoned them in the underworld. I used to know all their names: when I was a kid, I was really into myths and legends, heroes, all that shit." He studied the toys positioned up the mountain's sides. They were larger than the figures at its crown, over-muscled, one with an extra pair of arms, another with a snake's head, a third with a single, glaring eye. Buchanan shook his head. "I can't remember any of their names now. Except for this guy," he pointed at a figurine near the summit. "I'm pretty sure he's Kronos."

“Kronos?” The figure was approximately that of a man, although its arms and legs were slightly too long, its hands and feet oversized. Its head was surrounded by a corona of gray hair that descended into a jagged beard. The toy’s mouth had been sculpted with its mouth gaping, its eyes round, idiot. Vasquez smelled spoiled meat, felt the cardboard slipping from her grasp.

“Whoa.” Buchanan caught the box, replaced it on the shelf.

“Sorry,” Vasquez said. *Mr. White had ignored her, strolling across the round chamber to the foot of the stairs, which he had climbed quickly.*

“I don’t think that’s really Sam’s speed, anyway. Come on,” Buchanan said, moving down the aisle.

When they had stopped in front of a stack of remote-controlled cars, Vasquez said, “So who was Kronos?” Her voice was steady.

“What?” Buchanan said. “Oh—Kronos? He was Zeus’s father. Ate all his kids because he’d heard that one of them was going to replace him.”

“Jesus.”

“Yeah. Somehow, Zeus avoided becoming dinner and overthrew the old man.”

“Did he—did Zeus kill him?”

“I don’t think so. I’m pretty sure Kronos wound up with the rest of the Titans, underground.”

“Underground? I thought you said they were in the underworld.”

“Same diff,” Buchanan said. “That’s where those guys thought the underworld was, someplace deep underground. You got to it through caves.”

“Oh.”

In the end, Buchanan decided on a large wooden castle that came with a host of knights, some on horseback, some on foot, a trio of princesses, a unicorn, and a dragon. The entire set cost two hundred and sixty euros, which struck Vasquez as wildly overpriced but which Buchanan paid without a murmur of protest—the extravagance of the present, she understood, being the point. Buchanan refused the cashier’s offer to gift-wrap the box, and they left the store with him carrying it under his arm.

Once on the sidewalk, Vasquez said, “Not to be a bitch, but what are you planning to do with that?”

Buchanan shrugged. “I’ll think of something. Maybe the front desk’ll hold it.”

Vasquez said nothing. Although the sky still glowed blue, the light had begun to drain out of the spaces among the buildings, replaced by a darkness that was almost granular. The air was warm, soupy. As they stopped at the corner, Vasquez said, “You know, we never asked Plowman about Lavalle or Maxwell.”

“Yeah, so?”

“Just—I wish we had. He had an answer for everything else, I wouldn’t have minded hearing him explain that.”

“There’s nothing to explain,” Buchanan said.

“We’re the last ones alive—”

“Plowman’s living. So’s Mr. White.”

“Whatever—you know what I mean. Christ, even Just-Call-Me-Bill is dead. What the fuck’s up with that?”

In front of them, traffic stopped. The walk signal lighted its green man. They joined the surge across the street. “It’s a war, Vasquez,” Buchanan said. “People die in them.”

“Is that what you really believe?”

“It is.”

“What about your freak-out before, at the Tower?”

“That’s exactly what it was—me freaking out.”

“Okay,” Vasquez said after a moment, “okay. Maybe Bill’s death was an accident; maybe Maxwell, too. What about Lavalle? What about Ruiz? You telling me it’s normal two guys from the same detail try to off themselves?”

“I don’t know.” Buchanan shook his head. “You know the Army isn’t big on mental health care. And let’s face it, that was some pretty fucked-up shit went on in the Closet. Not much of a surprise if Lavalle and Ruiz couldn’t handle it, is it?”

Vasquez waited another block before asking, “How do you deal with it, the Closet?”

Buchanan took one more block after that to answer: “I don’t think about it.”

“You don’t?”

“I’m not saying the thought of what we did over there never crosses my mind, but as a rule I focus on the here and now.”

“What about the times the thought does cross your mind?”

“I tell myself it was a different place with different rules. You know what I’m talking about. You had to be there; if you weren’t, then shut the fuck up. Maybe what we did went over the line, but that’s for us to say, not some panel of officers don’t know their ass from a hole in the ground, and damn sure not some reporter never been closer to war than a goddamn showing of *Platoon*.” Buchanan glared. “You hear me?”

“Yeah.” How many times had she used the same arguments, or close enough, with her father? He had remained unconvinced. *So only the criminals are fit to judge the crime?* he had said. *What a novel approach to justice.* She said, “You know what I hate, though? It isn’t that people look at me funny—*Oh, it’s her*—it isn’t even the few who run up to me in the supermarket and tell me what a disgrace I am. It’s like you said, they weren’t there, so fuck ’em. What gets me are the ones who come up to you and tell you, ‘Good job, you fixed them Ay-rabs right,’ the crackers who wouldn’t have anything to do with someone like me, otherwise.”

“Even crackers can be right sometimes,” Buchanan said.

7

Mr. White’s room was on the sixth floor, at the end of a short corridor that lay around a sharp left turn. The door to the junior suite appeared unremarkable, but it was difficult to be sure, since both the bulbs in the wall-sconces on either side of the corridor were out. Vasquez searched for a light switch and, when she could not find one, said, “Either they’re blown, or the switch is inside his room.”

Buchanan, who had been unsuccessful convincing the woman at the front desk to watch his son's present, was busy fitting it beneath one of the chairs to the right of the elevator door.

"Did you hear me?" Vasquez asked.

"Yeah."

"Well?"

"Well what?"

"I don't like it. Our visibility's fucked. He opens the door, the light's behind him, in our faces. He turns on the hall lights, and we're blind."

"For, like, a second."

"That's more than enough time for Mr. White to do something."

"Will you listen to yourself?"

"You saw what he could do with that knife."

"All right," Buchanan said, "how do you propose we deal with this?"

Vasquez paused. "You knock on the door. I'll stand a couple of feet back with my gun in my pocket. If things go pear-shaped, I'll be in a position to take him out."

"How come I have to knock on the door?"

"Because he liked you better."

"Bullshit."

"He did. He treated me like I wasn't there."

"That was the way Mr. White was with everyone."

"Not you."

Holding his hands up, Buchanan said, "Fine. Dude creeps you out so much, it's probably better I'm the one talking to him." He checked his watch. "Five minutes till show time. Or should I say, 'T-minus five and counting,' something like that?"

"Of all the things I'm going to miss about working with you, your sense of humor's going to be at the top of the list."

"No sign of Plowman yet." Buchanan checked the panel next to the elevator, which showed it on the third floor.

“He’ll be here at precisely eleven ten.”

“No doubt.”

“Well…” Vasquez turned away from Buchanan.

“Wait—where are you going? There’s still four minutes on the clock.”

“Good: it’ll give our eyes time to adjust.”

“I am so glad this is almost over,” Buchanan said, but he accompanied Vasquez to the near end of the corridor to Mr. White’s room. She could feel him vibrating with a surplus of smart-ass remarks, but he had enough sense to keep his mouth shut. The air was cool, floral-scented with whatever they’d used to clean the carpet. Vasquez expected the minutes to drag by, for there to be ample opportunity for her to fit the various fragments of information in her possession into something like a coherent picture; however, it seemed practically the next second after her eyes had adapted to the shadows leading up to Mr. White’s door, Buchanan was moving past her. There was time for her to slide the pistol out from under her blouse and slip in into the right front pocket of her slacks, and then Buchanan’s knuckles were rapping the door.

It opened so quickly, Vasquez almost believed Mr. White had been positioned there, waiting for them. The glow that framed him was soft, orange, an adjustable light dialed down to its lowest setting, or a candle. From what she could see of him, Mr. White was the same as ever, from his unruly hair, more gray than white, to his dirty white suit. Vasquez could not tell whether his hands were empty. In her pocket, her palm was slick on the pistol’s grip.

At the sight of Buchanan, Mr. White’s expression did not change. He stood in the doorway regarding the man, and Vasquez three feet behind him, until Buchanan cleared his throat and said, “Evening, Mr. White. Maybe you remember me from Bagram. I’m Buchanan; my associate is Vasquez. We were part of Sergeant Plowman’s crew; we assisted you with your work interrogating prisoners.”

Mr. White continued to stare at Buchanan. Vasquez felt panic gathering in the pit of her stomach. Buchanan went on, “We were hoping you would accompany us on a short walk. There are matters we’d like to discuss with you, and we’ve come a long way.”

Without speaking, Mr. White stepped into the corridor. The fear, the urge to sprint away from here as fast as her legs would take her, which had been churning in Vasquez's gut, leapt up like a geyser. Buchanan said, "Thank you. This won't take five minutes—ten, tops."

Behind her, the floor creaked. She looked back, saw Plowman standing there, and in her confusion did not register what he was holding in his hand. Someone coughed, and Buchanan collapsed. They coughed again, and it was as if a snowball packed with ice struck Vasquez's back low and to the left.

All the strength left her legs. She sat down where she was, listing to her right until the wall stopped her. Plowman stepped over her. The gun in his right hand was lowered; in his left he held a small box. He raised the box, pressed it, and the wall sconces erupted in deep purple—black light, by whose illumination Vasquez saw the walls, the ceiling, the carpet of the short corridor covered in symbols drawn in a medium that shone pale white. She couldn't identify most of them: she thought she saw a scattering of Greek characters, but the rest were unfamiliar, circles bisected by straight lines traversed by short, wavy lines, a long, gradual curve like a smile, more intersecting lines. The only figure she knew for sure was a circle whose thick circumference was broken at about the eight o'clock point, inside which Mr. White was standing and Buchanan lying. Whatever Plowman had used to draw them made the symbols appear to float in front of the surfaces on which he'd marked them, strange constellations crammed into an undersized sky.

Plowman was speaking, the words he was uttering unlike any Vasquez had heard, thick ropes of sound that started deep in his throat and spilled into the air squirming, writhing over her eardrums. Now Mr. White's face showed emotion: surprise mixed with what might have been dismay, even anger. Plowman halted next to the broken circle and used his right foot to roll Buchanan onto his back. Buchanan's eyes were open, unblinking, his lips parted. The exit wound in his throat shone darkly. His voice rising, Plowman completed what he was saying, gestured with both hands at the body, and retreated to Vasquez.

For an interval of time that lasted much too long, the space where Mr. White and Buchanan were was full of something too big, which had to

double over to cram itself into the corridor. Eyes the size of dinner plates stared at Plowman, at Vasquez, with a lunacy that pressed on her like an animal scenting her with its sharp snout. Amidst a beard caked and clotted with offal, a mouth full of teeth cracked and stained black formed sounds Vasquez could not distinguish. Great pale hands large as tires roamed the floor beneath the figure—Vasquez was reminded of a blind man investigating an unfamiliar surface. When the hands found Buchanan, they scooped him up like a doll and raised him to that enormous mouth.

Groaning, Vasquez tried to roll away from the sight of Buchanan's head surrounded by teeth like broken flagstones. It wasn't easy. For one thing, her right hand was still in her pants pocket, its fingers tight around the Walther, her wrist and arm bent in at awkward angles. (She supposed she should be grateful she hadn't shot herself.) For another thing, the cold that had struck her back was gone, replaced by heat, by a sharp pain that grew sharper still as she twisted away from the snap and crunch of those teeth biting through Buchanan's skull. *God.* She managed to move onto her back, exhaling sharply. To her right, the sounds of Buchanan's consumption continued, bones snapping, flesh tearing, cloth ripping. Mr. White—what had been Mr. White—or what he truly was—that vast figure was grunting with pleasure, smacking its lips together like someone starved for food given a gourmet meal.

"For what it's worth," Plowman said, "I wasn't completely dishonest with you." One leg to either side of hers, he squatted over her, resting his elbows on his knees. "I do intend to bring Mr. White into my service; it's just the methods necessary for me to do so are a little extreme."

Vasquez tried to speak. "What… is he?"

"It doesn't matter," Plowman said. "He's old—I mean, if I told you how old he is, you'd think…" He looked to his left, to the giant sucking the gore from its fingers. "Well, maybe not. He's been around for a long time, and he knows a lot of things. We—what we were doing at Bagram, the interrogations, they woke him. I guess that's the best way to put it; although you could say they called him forth. It took me a while to figure out everything, even after he revealed himself to me. But there's nothing like prison to give you time for reflection. And research.

“That research says the best way to bind someone like Mr. White is—actually, it’s pretty complicated.” Plowman waved his pistol at the symbols shining around them. “The part that will be of most immediate interest to you is the sacrifice of a man and woman who are in my command. I apologize. I intended to put the two of you down before you knew what was happening; I mean, there’s no need to be cruel about this. With you, however, I’m afraid my aim was off. Don’t worry. I’ll finish what I started before I turn you over to Mr. White.”

Vasquez tilted her right hand up and squeezed the trigger of her gun. Four pops rushed one after the other, blowing open her pocket. Plowman leapt back, stumbled against the opposite wall. Blood bloomed across the inner thigh of his trousers, the belly of his shirt. Wiped clean by surprise, his face was blank. He swung his gun toward Vazquez, who angled her right hand down and squeezed the trigger again. The top of Plowman’s shirt puffed out; his right eye burst. His arm relaxed, his pistol thumped on the floor, and, a second later, he joined it.

The burn of suddenly hot metal through her pocket sent Vasquez scrambling up the wall behind her before the pain lodged in her back could catch her. In the process, she yanked out the Walther and pointed it at the door to the junior suite—

—in front of which Mr. White was standing, hands in his jacket pockets. A dark smear in front of him was all that was left of Buchanan. *Jesus God…* The air reeked of black powder and copper. Across from her, Plowman stared at nothing through his remaining eye. Mr. White regarded her with something like interest. *If he moves, I’ll shoot,* Vasquez thought, but Mr. White did not move, not the length of time it took her to back out of the corridor and retreat to the elevator, the muzzle of the pistol centered on Mr. White, then on where Mr. White would be if he rounded the corner. Her back was a knot of fire. When she reached the elevator, she slapped the call button with her left hand while maintaining her aim with her right. Out of the corner of her eye she saw Buchanan’s gift for his son, all two hundred and sixty euros worth, wedged under its chair. She left it where it was. A faint glow shone from the near end of the corridor: Plowman’s black-lighted symbols. Was the glow changing, obscured by an enormous form crawling toward her? When the elevator dinged behind her, she stepped into it, the

gun up in front of her until the doors had closed and the elevator had commenced its descent.

The back of her blouse was stuck to her skin; a trickle of blood tickled the small of her back. The interior of the elevator dimmed to the point of disappearing entirely. The Walther weighed a thousand pounds. Her legs wobbled madly. Vasquez lowered the gun, reached her left hand out to steady herself. When it touched, not metal, but cool stone, she was not as surprised as she should have been. As her vision returned, she saw that she was in a wide, circular area, the roof flat, low, the walls no more than shadowy suggestions. The space was lit by a symbol incised on the rock at her feet: a rough circle, the diameter of a manhole cover, broken at about eight o'clock, whose perimeter was shining with cold light. Behind and to her left, the scrape of bare flesh dragging over stone turned her around. This section of the curving wall opened in a black arch like the top of an enormous throat. Deep in the darkness, she could detect movement, but was not yet able to distinguish it.

As she raised the pistol one more time, Vasquez was not amazed to find herself here, under the ground with things whose idiot hunger eclipsed the span of the oldest human civilizations, things she had helped summon. She was astounded to have thought she'd ever left.

The Unbearable Proximity of Mr. Dunn's Balloons

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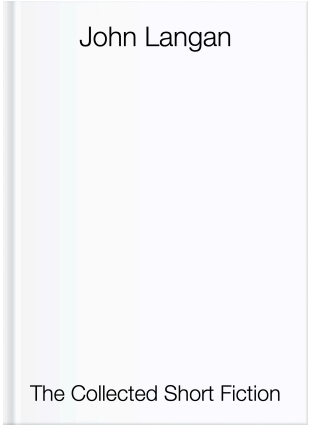

1

"Come, now," Dunn said. His voice sounded as reasonable as it had at any point these last seven days. "Surely you must have expected something like this."

On reflection, Coleman supposed the man had a point. That did not stop him from thrusting his rapier into the nearest of the balloons.

2

"I'm sorry?" Coleman said, turning from the train's window. Under the pretense of watching the Hudson slide past, he had been studying his reflection, renewing his debate with himself over shaving the beard he had worn since his mid-twenties, the white hairs of which he feared added a full decade to his appearance, advancing (distinguished) middle age to premature old age.

"I asked if you are planning to interview Mr. Dunn," the young man seated across the compartment said. "You had said you write, so it occurred to me that you might be at work on an article about him."

"I am not," Coleman said. "I no longer write as much for the magazines as I used to. Of late, I've been concentrating my efforts on my fiction."

"Oh," said the young man, who had introduced himself at Grand Central as Cal Earnshaw. While the suit in which he traveled appeared of reasonable quality, there was a leanness to Cal's face that suggested those of beggars Coleman had passed along the Venetian canals. The even younger woman

seated beside Cal, his wife, Isabelle, said, “If I may be forward, Mr. Coleman, why are you on your way to Mr. Dunn’s? From what I’ve read of your novels, it doesn’t seem as though the… extravagances of Mr. Dunn and his followers would hold much of interest for you.”

Despite himself, a little thrill raced up Coleman’s spine at Mrs. Earnshaw’s admission of familiarity with his work; a similar confession, he felt certain, would not trouble her husband’s lips. He said, “You underestimate me, Madame. My father was a Swedenborgian, albeit an idiosyncratic one.”

“You don’t say,” Cal said.

“I do.”

“Do you imply that you have inherited your father’s beliefs?” Isabelle said.

“I imply nothing of the kind,” Coleman said. “My father found Swedenborg sufficient to his needs; my interest, however, has tended toward the manner in which we make our way through this life, rather than any other.”

“Yet surely,” Isabelle said, “the nature of our beliefs about the life to come may exert a profound influence upon our conduct in the life that is.”

“Undoubtedly,” Coleman said. “Although, from my observations, that influence is frequently more occult than direct.”

“Then why have you joined us?” Cal said. “Not that we regret the company.”

“I am on this train,” Coleman said, “in hopes of seeing Mr. Dunn’s balloons, about which so much has been written.”

“You have read Mrs. Barchester’s report of them?” Isabelle said.

“It was that which brought them to my attention,” Coleman said. “A friend passing through London made me a gift of her book. My thoughts of late have tended in the direction of the place of my birth. I would not call any point along the Hudson my home, but so much of my childhood was spent traveling up and down the shores of what we used to call the North River that something of the word’s glamor attaches to the region, as a whole. When my friend’s generosity presented me with Mrs. Barchester’s record of her tour up the Hudson, I took it as practically an omen that I should revisit the scenes of my boyhood. Her description of Mr. Dunn’s rather remarkable

paper balloons iced the cake, so to speak. Even before I had turned the last page, I had booked my trip and written to another friend to ask if it were in his powers to arrange a visit to Summerland for me. It was, and"—Coleman spread his hands—"I have the pleasure of your company. I take it your motivations are of a more spiritual character."

"We are going to prepare for my crossing," Cal said.

"I beg your pardon?"

"My husband is ill, Mr. Coleman." Isabelle laid a gloved hand on her husband's. "We have exhausted all his inheritance and most of mine in search of a cure. There is none. The last physician we consulted—Sir Luke Strett: perhaps you have heard of him? He is very well known on the Continent."

Coleman was unsure. "The name is familiar, yes."

"He advised us that Cal's time is short, and that there are better ways to spend it than chasing false hope."

"I've long had an interest in the writings of Mr. Dunn and his set," Cal said. "Mr. Davis, the Fox sisters… the picture of the next life they have advanced seems so much more *reasonable* than that of the traditional faiths. Upon our return to Brooklyn, I threw myself into a study of their work. I read their books; I sat in on their séances; I heard their lectures. Had my health been firmer, I would have attended one of their conventions, although there was no real need of that. What I had learned was enough to justify my previous interest."

Isabelle said, "During one of Mr. Dunn's lectures, he mentioned that, upon occasion, he had aided those approaching this life's end in readying themselves for the next. Afterwards, Cal and I succeeded in speaking to the man, and once he knew our story, he volunteered his services upon the spot."

"Is that so?"

"Yes." Cal nodded. "Not only did Mr. Dunn refuse what little payment we could offer, he provided for our travel from our home to his."

"How very generous of him."

"It was—it is," Isabelle said.

“Perhaps you had rather I defer my visit to Summerland,” Coleman said. “Compared to yours, my reasons for this trip are trivial. I would not wish to interfere with Mr. Dunn’s plans for you.”

“Nonsense,” Cal said. “You won’t be interfering a bit.”

“According to Mr. Dunn’s letter to us,” Isabelle said, “he will require some time alone with my husband. Although he assures us his house’s library is thoroughly stocked, I should be grateful for a companion to help me pass the hours.”

“You may consider me at your disposal,” Coleman said.

3

Summerland, Poughkeepsie

June 16, 1888

Strange to meet Parrish Dunn today. I wouldn’t say I’ve been brooding on the man, but he has engaged my thoughts for much of the last several months. The successful arms merchant who washes his hands of the blood in which he’s steeped them for nigh on twenty years to devote himself to the promulgation of his new Spiritualist beliefs—not to mention, to fashioning his elaborate balloons—how could such a figure not be of interest? I’ve spent enough time—enough pages in this notebook—supplementing the scant description of him in Mrs. Barchester’s North Along the Hudson *that to meet the original to whom my speculations owe their existence gave me a jolt.*

He looks like an arms merchant—strike that, he looks like an arms maker, one of those powers charged by the other gods with forging their spears and shields deep in the bowels of a smoking volcano. Until this point in my life, I have considered my five foot ten inches a more than adequate height, but Dunn must stand somewhere in the vicinity of six foot seven, six foot eight. He rises up to that measurement like a mountain; I’ve never done well at estimating anyone’s weight, so it may be more useful to write that he appears almost as wide as he is tall. Every item he was wearing—black suit, white shirt, black shoes—must have been specially made for him.

Because of his size, Dunn's face, which would otherwise fall somewhere in the broad middle of the human spectrum, has something of the grotesque to it. He is bald, and the expanse of his great skull somehow contributes to this impression. His heavy lips frame a mouth whose thick teeth seem formed for tearing the meat from a leg of venison. His nose is flat, wide, crossed by a white scar that continues across the right cheek. His eyes protrude from their sockets, so that he appears to watch you intensely.

His appearance aside, Dunn has been the model host. His carriage was waiting for us at the train station, and he was waiting for us at the front gate to Summerland. (Note: Must check details of house. I'm fairly sure it's the style known as Second Empire—tall and narrow, like a collection of rectangles stood on their short ends. Roof—Mansard roof?—like a cap. White with black trim, freshly painted, the white blinding in the afternoon, the black shining. Extensive gardens in the English fashion. Situated on a hilltop overlooking the Hudson and the steep hills on the other shore.) The room in which I have been housed is easily four times as large as the cabin in which I crossed the Atlantic, and extravagantly furnished.

The single most interesting feature of my room, though, is the balloon floating in the center of it, at the foot of the bed. I've read Mrs. Barchester's description of Dunn's balloons over and over again; it's one of the few passages in her book in which my fascination with the subject matter blinds me to the dreadfulness of her prose. Not surprisingly, she has not done the things justice. The size, for example: no doubt she's measured the diameter correctly as three feet, but she has failed utterly in conveying a sense of the balloon's volume, of the manner in which it fills the space in which it hangs like a globe set loose from its moorings. The things are apparently composed of brown paper, which appears heavy, coarse-grained, and which still bears the folds and creases necessary to achieve the balloon's shape. Its seams are dark with whatever Dunn used to seal them. Perhaps the most serious defect in Mrs. Barchester's account of the balloons, however, lies in her remarks upon the designs that cover their surfaces. She writes of the "quaint Oriental patterns with which Mr. Dunn has decorated his inventions." Yet the arrangement of the figures in latitudinal lines, their irregular repetition, give more the impression of communication than ornamentation. The script is none I can read or even recognize: its

characters appear drawn from the loops and twists woven into the room's Turkish carpet; nor am I certain of the medium in which Dunn has applied them, which shines as if fresh, and in whose depths I catch traces of crimson, viridian, and purple.

And there is more to note. A distinct odor clouds the air around the balloon. It mixes the wood-pulp smell of the paper with another, faintly medicinal scent, possibly that of ether. (Is this due to the manner in which Dunn suspends his creations?) Underneath the combined smells, I perceive a third, damp, earthy. The balloon's surface produces a low and constant crackling as it shifts in the currents of air wafting into the room through its windows. I went to touch the thing, to add its texture to my catalogue of impressions, only to hesitate with the tips of my fingers a hairsbreadth from its paper. I was seized by the most overpowering repugnance, such that the hairs from the back of my hand right up my forearm stood rigid. I swear, my flesh actually shrank from the thing. For the briefest of instants, I wanted nothing more than to see the balloon destroyed—torn apart, set alight. It was the kind and intensity of response I would have expected confronting an especially loathsome insect, not an eccentric's amusement. I dropped my hand and decided my investigations had proceeded far enough for the moment.

Such a curious reaction—a consequence of the day's travel?

4

Given his response to the balloon in his chamber, Coleman did not expect that he would be able to sleep in its presence, and he intended to ask Dunn to have it removed after dinner. At the conclusion of the meal, however, Dunn retreated to the library with Cal, whose preparations for their imminent work together the man declared must be seen to posthaste. Not to mention, removed from close quarters with the thing, Coleman's initial antipathy toward it seemed vague, ridiculous. He could wait, he decided, for morning.

Outside the door to his room, though, the self-assurance of minutes before felt cavalier, reckless. So he was relieved when he found the balloon had

drifted to the window, where its presence was, if not pleasant, not as repellent.

5

"Do you believe Mr. Dunn?" Isabelle asked.

"Heavens, no," Coleman laughed. "A meeting with old Ahasuerus, the Wandering Jew himself, on the eve of the battle at Gettysburg? Tutelage in the secret arts of Simon Magus? A saving intercession in his later life by the spirits of his mother, Paracelsus, and Swedenborg? It's like a distillation of every melodrama produced these last fifty years. No, I suspect Mr. Dunn's narrative is no more than a way for him to align his past acts with his present practices."

Isabelle frowned, but did not reply. She inclined toward a bush whose name Coleman didn't know but on whose branches a large orange-and-black butterfly moved its wings.

"I am much more interested," Coleman said, "in our host's reluctance to describe the means by which he fashions his balloons."

6

"You are preoccupied today," Isabelle said.

"Am I?" Coleman turned his gaze from the blue sheet of the Hudson.

She nodded. "Since Mr. Dunn's recitation of his years as an arms merchant last night, your thoughts have been elsewhere, I believe."

Coleman smiled. "I fear I am not as cryptic as I would like."

"Or I am becoming more adept at deciphering you."

One of Dunn's balloons had drifted near. Coleman raised his hand to push it away, only to find himself once more hesitating before his fingers touched its papery surface, his skin literally crawling at the thing's proximity. Instead, he stood from the bench upon which he and Mrs. Earnshaw had admired the view from Dunn's garden and set off at a slow pace along its paths. Isabelle hurried after him. He preempted her question about his response to the balloon by saying, "You are correct. I have been distracted,

and our host's words were the cause of it, specifically, his account of the bargain he struck for the rifles taken from the so-called Paris Commune. I was in Paris during the Commune. I'd come in with the second or third shipment of food Great Britain sent after the Prussians lifted their siege of the city. I'd thought I might write a series of articles about the state of the capital, which during the siege had become a focus of international attention and sympathy. It was a project for which I was well suited. Not only was I fluent in the language, but I had visited Paris several times during my youth, and I had maintained my correspondence with several of the friends I had made during those trips. One of these friends helped me secure lodgings in the Vaugirard district, and I settled down to work.

"I was staying at the edge of the city, so each morning I set out to walk into it. While I was cautious at first, I soon became more confident and was ranging far and wide. Some parts of the city seemed hardly to have been affected at all; others—I can recall my shock at seeing the Ministry of Finance, which had been pounded almost entirely into rubble by the Prussian guns, so that what remained resembled an antique ruin. Toward the end of the day I would return home and record my experiences. Once a week I would write a short essay detailing my impressions, which I sent off to Rupert Cook at *Howell's*. He liked the pieces well enough, although he paid the bare minimum for them. To be frank, I did not expect Cook would continue to purchase my essays for very long, once their novelty wore off. For the moment, however, I was in Paris, gathering details for my next novel, which (I hoped) would meet with more success than either of my previous attempts had. If I husbanded my resources, I judged I might be able to extend my stay by as much as another year.

"In the wake of the French defeat, the city—the country—was in tumult. Indeed, the new government chose to convene in Versailles, for fear of the Parisian crowds. One of President Thiers's first moves was to pass the Law of Maturities, whose ostensible purpose was to refill the coffers depleted by the war, but whose not-so-secret intent was to bring Paris, which was to provide an undue share of the revenue, to heel. The Commune arose as an attempt by the residents of the city to administer their own affairs more justly. For the two months of the Commune's rule, Paris was—it was no less turbulent, but the daily chaos was shot through with optimism, with

excitement. There was a significant population of foreigners living in the city, exiles, many of them, from more repressive states, and perhaps because of this, what was taking place felt as if its implications went far beyond the city's borders. I filled one notebook and most of a second.

"There had been some skirmishes between the forces defending Paris and those loyal to the national government, but nothing of consequence, or so I judged. How naïve do I sound if I say that I did not believe the dispute between the city and the country would be settled through force of arms? Yet the morning of May twenty-first, I awakened to the sound of the first of the national government's forces marching through the streets. I had not appreciated the unhappiness the residents of the city's western districts felt toward the Commune. This included one of my oldest correspondents, a former professor of classics who I later learned had been passing information along to the president's agents. In fact, he was among those to suggest the route by which the French army might gain access to the city, and to offer reassurance that the soldiers would receive a warm welcome when they arrived.

"Which they did: the avenue outside my window was lined with men, women, children, there to greet the troops as liberators. I stared down at the ranks of men in their blue jackets and red trousers, their kepi caps perched on their heads, their rifles shouldered, and it was as if I were witnessing a performance, some new variety of theater performed in the open air. I could not accept its reality. I kept thinking, *Surely not, surely not.*

"The seven days that followed have come to be known as *La Semaine Sanglante,* the Bloody Week. In short order, Thiers's forces took the western districts; the east, however, was the seat of the Commune, and the fighting there was fierce. Travel through the streets was difficult, sometimes impossible, but it wasn't necessary to go very far to know what was happening. All you had to do was walk to your window to hear the crack of the rifles, the boom of the cannons. The sharp smells of gunpowder and burning wood stained the air. Later I read that, at the president's request, the Prussians had expedited the release of thousands of the French soldiers they had captured, in order to swell the ranks of the national army. The Commune had no centralized plan for defense; rather, each district was charged with its own security. This allowed the army to divide and conquer

the Commune. I, who had missed the civil war in the land of my birth, found myself at the heart of another.

"Nor was the Bloody Week the worst of it. Following the army's conquest of the city, the members of the Commune were subject to extended reprisals. Having been associated with the city's government to the slightest degree might lead to trial and execution. The cemetery at Père Lachaise, the Luxembourg Gardens, were taken over by firing squads. I might have fallen under suspicion myself, were it not for my old friend the professor of classics, who testified to my character.

"I could have stayed, I suppose, but the prospect of remaining in the ruin of the Commune was too bleak. Rupert Cook had lost interest in my reports, so I judged the time right to depart Paris. I stopped at Geneva for a few months, spent the winter in Florence, and settled in Venice. There I remained for the next fifteen years, for the first five of which Paris remained under martial law. Needless to say, the novel I had hoped would emerge from my time in the city remained unwritten. It has only been the past few years that I have been able to return to Paris. I had thought I might live there again, but it was impossible. The ghosts of seventeen years past would not allow it.

"So to hear that Mr. Dunn had built his early fortune by trading in the Commune's weapons was… unsettling. To say the least." His smile was humorless.

Another balloon had drawn close to them. "I believe your husband's afternoon session should be drawing to a close," Coleman said. He walked away from the balloon, toward the house.

7

"Were you of age during the War Between the States?" Dunn asked.

"I was," Coleman said without turning his gaze from the swords racked between two of the library's considerable bookcases. He touched the pommel of a rapier. "May I?"

"Of course."

The sword was heavier than Coleman anticipated. It took him a moment to find its balance, after which he slashed right to left, left to right, theatrically.

"You were an officer," Dunn said.

"I was not," Coleman said, replacing the sword. "I suffered an… injury a few years before the outbreak of hostilities. I was visiting family friends, and there was a fire in their barn, which I joined the effort to extinguish. I was standing too close to one of the walls when it collapsed and showered me with debris. The quick response of my fellows saved me, but I was left unfit for service. Both my older brothers, Will and Bob, distinguished themselves in the war; in fact, Bob became one of Grant's aides." He spared a glance at Dunn, who was studying him intently. Coleman went on, "Since moving to London I've taken up fencing as a way to hold the effects of aging at bay."

"The effects of your injury have lessened with the years," Dunn said.

"They have not hindered my exercise, no."

"Perhaps they would have allowed you to join your brothers."

"Perhaps," Coleman said. "I was in England when Sumter was shelled, and my father insisted I remain there."

"Due to your wound."

Coleman felt his face redden. "If there is an inference you would like to make clear—"

"Nothing of the kind," Dunn said, waving one of his massive hands. "You should be grateful—you should fall on your knees and give thanks to whatever God you venerate for that injury. Whatever discomfort, whatever pain it has brought to you has preserved you from an experience vastly more terrible, from wading knee-deep in a tide of blood and gore. It was something of a witticism among my fellow soldiers that should any of us fall in battle, he need have no fear of the Christian hell, because next to the sights we had witnessed, its famous torments would count as naught." Dunn paused. "I beg your pardon: I don't mean to bore you with an old soldier's platitudes. Lunch should be ready on the patio."

Coleman followed Dunn out of the library with the enormous oak table at its center, the handful of balloons floating amidst its bookcases. He was

thinking that Dunn had uttered his description of the war in a tone not of horror, but nostalgia.

8

"I wonder, sir, what you regret," Cal Earnshaw said.

"I beg your pardon?" Coleman looked up from his book.

Cal pushed himself slightly higher in his Adirondack chair. "You may imagine," he said, panting from the effort, "a man in my position finds a great deal he wishes he could do, or undo. Some of it is fairly obvious: Isabelle and I will never have a family. Some of it is more idiosyncratic: I will not see the pyramids, which has been an ambition of mine since I read about them as a boy. I've tried to reconcile myself to these facts, for really, what else can I do? Yet I am so far unable to rise above my frustration—my anger, if I am to speak candidly—at everything I am to lose. I keep hoping that the peace which is supposed to descend on those nearing death's precincts will find me, but it has not.

"All of which," he continued, "is preamble to my asking what regrets a man like you might harbor. You have lived longer than have I; you have traveled far, resided in places that are only names on a map to me. You have authored several novels, many more stories; you have written extensively for an assortment of periodicals. In short, you have had a life whose fullness, if not its exact details, I should have liked for mine. I know that you must have had your disappointments, but weighed against that fullness, I find it difficult to believe that any mistake or missed opportunity could matter that much."

Coleman set his book on the arm of his chair. A quartet of balloons hovered in the near distance; he fought the urge to depart the porch with all due speed. He had promised Isabelle that he would sit with her husband while he recovered from his morning session with Dunn (which appeared to be hastening the end they were supposed to be preparing him for: in the last five days, Cal had gone from gaunt to skeletal, his skin stretched taut over his bones—his skin had become gray, papery, and a sour odor clung to him). Doing his best not to listen to the balloons' soft, incessant rustling,

Coleman let his gaze drift to the Hudson, full of craft large and small this sunny day.

"When I was a young man," he began, "not very much older than you…" His voice trailed off.

After a moment, Cal said, "Mr. Coleman?"

With a shake of his head, Coleman said, "Forgive me, Mr. Earnshaw. In many ways you're right: my life has been much as I wished it to be. What part of it I could control, at least. And what has lain outside my control, I have tried to cultivate a philosophical attitude toward. Often I've been able to console myself with the thought that whatever reversal of fortune I was experiencing would serve as the germ of a future story. In fact, what I'm about to tell you made it to a rather lengthy opening.

"That scene was from the point of view of a young Venetian gondolier. I can't remember the name I gave him. What was important was that he was a poet whose verses had not found success—thus his employment in the gondola—and his youth. This was contrasted with that of his passenger, whose middle age seemed to the gondolier just this side of the grave." Coleman caught himself. "I apologize—"

Cal waved his words away. "Go on. Please."

"Very well. The young man stares at his passenger openly, but the older man is too preoccupied either to notice or to mind. He is dressed for mourning, which may explain his distraction. Heaped on the passenger's lap are a dozen dresses—well made, as far as the gondolier can tell, though a bit threadbare.

"It is early morning. The sky is light, but the sun has yet to rise into it. In his heavily accented Italian, the passenger has requested that he be rowed out of the city and into the lagoon that borders it. The deepest point in the lagoon, he has said—he has insisted. The gondolier is not certain where the water is deepest. He waits until they are a suitable distance from the city, slows the gondola, and announces to the man that they have reached their destination.

"The passenger does not question him. Instead, he shifts to his right, raises the dress on top of the pile, and places it into the dark water. He does the same with the next dress, and the dress below that, laying each in the water

with remarkable tenderness, so that the gondolier is reminded of a groom bringing his new bride to the wedding bed.

"However, when the man only has a handful of dresses in his lap, something happens that causes him to start back from the water. The dresses he has submerged have returned, buoyed to the surface by the air trapped in their folds. On his knees, the passenger rushes to the side of the gondola with such violence that the gondolier has to shift his stance to keep the craft from tilting into the lagoon. Without removing his jacket, the passenger thrusts his arms into the water up to the elbow, pushing down on the risen dresses. It does no good. Pressing one part of the dress causes the rest of it to rise even higher. The man shoves the dresses down frantically, as if he is trying to drown them. He is soaked, but he doesn't care. The gondolier thinks that he should speak to his passenger, but he cannot decide what to say.

"At last the man slumps against the side of the gondola, exhausted, drenched, his face a mask of sorrow. That was where the scene ended, with him contracted in grief, the gondola surrounded by floating dresses, each moving slightly in the green water, the gondolier watching everything and contemplating a new poem he might write."

"The man," Cal said, "the passenger—"

"Yes," Coleman said.

"But the dresses—"

"Belonged to a woman named Philippa Irving Ventner. She was a writer, an American—in fact, she was born in Phoenicia, up in the Catskills. I met her in Geneva. She was touring the Continent along with her younger sister, Grace. She was supposed to be educating Grace in the finer points of European civilization, but her knowledge of the subject was less than complete. Not that this stopped her: if there was one thing she had perfected, it was in moving ahead, regardless of the circumstances. To be fair, it had led to her producing a novel, *The Naturalist's Lament,* which had done extremely well. If I'm to be completely frank with you, none of my books has sold anywhere close to what hers did. The profits had funded her trip with Grace, which in turn led to another novel, *Joanna's Secret,* which allowed her to remain abroad after she had returned her sister home.

“No picture does her justice. There are many of them. She was happy to sit for any artist who cared to paint her, and she loved to be photographed. Look at the better portraits in either medium, and you will see her high cheekbones, her pointed nose, her brown hair. You will not see the watchfulness, the attentiveness that was her habitual expression. You will not see the wit that animated her eyes, her lips—the tilt of her head ever so slightly forward—when she was engaged in conversation. She had a keen sense of humor, though her response to most humorous stories and remarks was to hide her laughter behind her hands.”

“You were—were you—”

“I met her several times over the next half a dozen years,” Coleman said, “most often in Venice after I had settled there. She tried life in London, then Berlin, then Vienna, before finally taking up my suggestion that Venice might prove more agreeable to her. For a time it was. We saw a great deal of one another, and the circles each of us frequented soon grew used to the pair of us attending their functions together. We had our routines, our rituals, our walks to St. Mark’s, our meals at Café Florian, our trips to the opera. She was the most agreeable person I have ever known; in her company, time ran more quickly, so that our excursions were over much too soon.

“When she approached me about renting rooms in a palace together, the idea struck me as inspired.” At the expression of shock on Cal’s face, Coleman hurried on: “The palace was the property of Constance Aspern, a very old woman who in her youth was supposed to have been one of Lord Byron’s lovers. The fortune that had sustained her decades in Venice was drying up, the consequence of a series of bad investments, and she thought that by taking in lodgers she might at least slow its loss. She offered a suite of rooms on the top floor and another on the ground floor, but really, whichever floor you chose, you had the run of it, since Miss Aspern did not stray often or far from her rooms on the middle floor. The entire palace had seen better days, but there was a kind of shabby glory to it—not to mention, the rent was ridiculously low. I took the top floor, Philippa the ground floor, and we settled into what seemed a particularly fortuitous arrangement.

“For one winter and part of the following spring, it was. Philippa and I passed our mornings working, then joined Miss Aspern for lunch, then

ventured out into Venice. So might we have continued to this very day, I daresay."

"What happened?" Cal asked.

"Our friendship changed," Coleman said after a moment. "It… deepened. I was—Philippa was a good ten years my junior. Children were… I… a long time ago, I had decided that, in order for me to achieve the art it was my ambition to produce, I would have to lead a certain kind of life. Until this point, I had remained true to my original plan. I suppose my resolve had borne fruit, albeit in books that were more praised than read. At private moments over the years I had wondered whether the course I'd chosen was the best one, but I'd never had so clear an alternative presented to me. For a week in early spring, I—we…

"The end of that time found me on a train to Paris. I was not—I had been contacted by an editor about the possibility of writing a piece for his magazine about the French capital ten years after its emergence from martial law. I decided that the ten days such a trip would require would allow me to evaluate the path onto which my life had swerved. I feared—I knew how my departure would appear to Philippa, and I did my best to reassure her that I was not fleeing her. She wasn't pleased, but neither was she overwrought. I would be back soon, and we would talk when I was.

"That was the last I saw of her. The night I left, the railing on which she was leaning as she stood at the window gave way, plummeting her to the courtyard thirty feet below. She was not killed instantly; she survived another three days in the hospital. No one knew how to reach me. Philippa departed this life without regaining consciousness, with only Miss Aspern for company. By the time I returned, a day later than I'd planned, she had been buried for several days."

"You had decided…"

"Does it matter?" Coleman said.

Cal did not answer.

"I left Venice not long after," Coleman said. "Miss Aspern had no objection to my maintaining my rooms; I believe she had some notion of congruence between us. I had neither the inclination nor the desire to figure in her tableau. I did see Grace—Philippa's younger sister, now married with four

children. I met her at her sister's grave. I hadn't remembered Grace as especially remarkable, and in the years since I had seen her last she had grown into one of those Americans who make you embarrassed for the country: vain, provincial, willfully ignorant. I had expected, had steeled myself for, an outpouring of sorrow at the sudden extinguishing of so bright a light. Instead, I was subjected to a torrent of scorn for such an 'odd duck.' I did my best to defend Philippa, but I was so astonished, I fumbled the effort. I grew angry, furious, so much so that I had no choice but to leave the cemetery immediately or risk doing violence to the woman."

Coleman slumped back in his chair. The quartet of balloons had settled into close orbit around him and Cal. He picked up his book and said, "In no way do I wish to minimize what you face losing. But there are times I have thought that, the longer I've lived, the more elaborate have grown the disasters in which I have enmeshed myself."

9

"And how is your work proceeding, Mr. Coleman?" Dunn asked. Isabelle and Cal had retired to their room for an hour before a late dinner. Coleman was seated in the lounge, his notebook open in his lap, when Dunn walked into the room. Closing the notebook, Coleman said, "My latest is still in the early stages."

"Would I be presumptuous," Dunn said, seating himself on the chair next to Coleman's, "if I asked its plot?"

"I don't suppose so," Coleman said, "although I should warn you that most of the interest in my fiction arises from its execution rather than its conception."

"You do yourself a disservice. You must forgive me—I have a terrible memory for the titles of these sorts of things—but your story about the man who is haunted by the ghosts of the family he did not have struck me as very original."

"'The Undiscovered Country,'" Coleman said, "and thank you. The piece I am working on now is in a similar vein. It concerns a man who, as a result of an injury received in battle, has lost the ability to feel. He is a scientist, and he devotes his efforts to understanding the nature or source of human

feeling. This leads to his performing a series of ghastly experiments upon a pair of innocents who seek his aid."

"Fascinating," Dunn said. "You intend the scientist as a villain."

"Not a villain so much as a… monomaniac, I would say. Of course, his inability to feel complicates the matter. Can he be held responsible for his actions if he is deficient in so fundamental a way?"

"Yes," Dunn said. "I thought you were going to say that it is the knowledge he pursues that muddies the waters."

"Oh?"

"Surely a great deal may be forgiven if the objective is the advancement of human understanding."

"I'm not sure," Coleman said. "It seems to me more the case that a great number of sins have sought to hide themselves under the fig leaf of knowledge."

"Sin? I am surprised to hear you employ such a useless word. What the world calls sin, Mr. Coleman, is little more than the courage of the uncowed intellect to follow its inclinations."

"A sentiment worthy of Goethe's Faust."

"A character, I remind you, who is rewarded for his ceaseless striving."

"What a consolation to poor Gretchen," Coleman said.

Dunn laughed. "You have an answer to everything, sir."

"So my brothers always complained."

10

"It will not be long, now, will it?" Isabelle said.

Coleman opened his mouth to offer a comforting platitude, but none would come. The sour smell that emanated from Cal had spread throughout the house. He said, "Your husband is in a great deal of pain."

"He is," Isabelle said. "I cannot understand how he bears it. But I might wish he were bearing it with me rather than with Mr. Dunn. I will lose my

husband soon enough, Mr. Coleman; I would like to spend what time I have left with him in his company."

"Didn't Dunn inform you—?"

"That he would be taking my husband from me for sessions morning, afternoon, and evening? That those sessions would continue for a week, with no end in sight save Cal's? No, Mr. Coleman, he did not. I assumed our stay would last a few days, no more. And I assumed that Mr. Dunn would require a few hours at most to prepare my husband for what is to come. I had read about Mr. Dunn's house—the beauty of its location, its garden-—and I fancied that coming here with Cal would be a kind of farewell occasion for us. Instead, it has been a rehearsal for the solitude I am too soon to know."

"Has your husband told you what the sessions consist of?"

"He has. Apparently, Mr. Dunn has him lie on the table in the library. Then he positions several of his balloons around the room."

"The balloons?"

"They are supposed to aid Cal in the process."

"Which consists in what?" Coleman said. "Does Dunn fill his head with pictures of the life to come?"

"No," Isabelle said, "just the opposite. He tells Cal to allow his mind to fill with the agony that afflicts him."

"Whatever for?"

"Mr. Dunn says that since Cal's pain is the route that will lead him out of this world and into the next, it is necessary for him to immerse himself in it, in order for his transition to be a smooth one."

Coleman frowned. "Does your husband at least feel that Dunn's ministrations are helping him?"

"He insists they are when I ask him, but if you could see the look in his eyes… I think he cannot stand for his sessions with Mr. Dunn to be anything other than helpful."

Summerland, Poughkeepsie

June 22, 1888

According to Dunn, not just the Hudson, but the stretch of the river next to Poughkeepsie is the site of a doorway from this world to the next. Of course, it would be, wouldn't it? But (supposedly) all manner of phenomena were visible on the surface of the water during the late 1850s, reported in local papers. Must research.

Strange how tired I am—not from any exertion, obviously, but from the stress of Cal Earnshaw's rapidly worsening condition, and its effect on his wife. Tonight she made her most direct plea yet for Dunn to allow her to take Cal and depart for home. Dunn would have none of it, insisting that he and Cal still have a great deal of preparation to do. He tried to draw me in on his side, but I refused. Perhaps I should have spoken more forcefully, insisted that Dunn send the Earnshaws on their way.

Would that I could climb into bed and sink into slumber—but the combination of the memories the last few days have stirred and the balloon that floats near my window keeps me awake.

12

"I intend to take my husband and depart this house immediately," Isabelle said. "Will you help me?"

"Yes," Coleman said.

13

There was a moment's resistance, then the tip of the rapier broke the balloon's skin. Coleman couldn't say what he had expected—for the paper sphere to burst, or deflate, or shoot across the library on its suddenly released contents—but assuredly, it was not the gout of thick, black fluid over the blade of the sword, across the floor. He drove the rapier in to the hilt, through the balloon's other side, and withdrew it as his tutor had instructed him, ready for a second thrust.

He need not have bothered. Listing to the right, the balloon was sinking, dark liquid dripping from the cuts Coleman had made to it. The stuff was thick as treacle and struck the marble tiles with a wet splat. With a strangled cry, Dunn ran for the sword rack. Coleman stabbed the next balloon, stepped forward, and slashed the balloon after that. By the time he heard Dunn's shoes slapping the floor behind him, Coleman had opened a vent in the fourth of the man's inventions. His sword was coated in whatever filled the balloons, which oozed across the floor in growing puddles that stank of rot. It seemed impossible that such a substance could cause the balloons to rise, and yet—

Coleman turned, sweeping his sword in a wide arc that caught Dunn's stab and flung his blade to the side. The man recovered quickly, cutting an X in front of him. Rather than parry, Coleman retreated several paces. Dunn was considerably stronger than he and had selected a heavy cavalry saber for his weapon; Coleman did not rank his chances of defeating the man especially high. If he could distract him from Isabelle, who had assisted Cal up from the table and was supporting him as he limped toward the library door, then Coleman would consider his performance a success.

Truth to tell, he was surprised by the fury with which Dunn now attacked him. Without a doubt, the balloons had cost him no small amount of time and effort. But Dunn's face was scarlet, his large eyes protruding with fury. Coleman had little doubt that, were he to allow Dunn the opportunity, his host would put his saber to deadly use. The man's moves were exaggerated, almost parodic, those of someone whose notions of handling a sword were drawn from the stage; should any of his swipes connect, however, its effects would be real enough.

Dunn had backed him to the foot of the table. A pair of balloons floated to Coleman's right, closer to the broad oak expanse (which, he had time to notice, was incised with row after row of the same figures written on the balloons' paper surface). There was no need for him to slash the two of them, yet there was no denying the deep rush of pleasure that accompanied the act. At this latest insult to his inventions, Dunn roared and charged. Coleman ducked the swing at his head and jabbed Dunn's right arm high, near the shoulder. Dunn yelped and retreated a step.

The library door slammed shut behind Isabelle and Cal Earnshaw. Coleman doubted Cal would last out the next hour, let alone the remainder of the night, but at least he would do so in the company of his wife and not splayed on a table surrounded by a charlatan and his paper toys. Coleman lowered the tip of his sword. His breath coming fast, he said, “There. Mrs. Earnshaw’s wishes have been fulfilled. Now perhaps you and I can settle matters between us in a more civilized fashion. I apologize for the destruction of your creations. I would be willing to recompense you a fair amount—”

“You fucking idiot,” Dunn said. He had pressed his left hand over the wound Coleman had given him; his fingers were scarlet. He had not dropped his saber, which he pointed at the first balloons Coleman had vandalized. “You think these are works of *art?* They are cages.”

“More metaphors?” Coleman looked to the other end of the room. The balloons he had stabbed were in a state of half-collapse on the floor, surrounded by ever-widening pools of brackish ichor. Those he had sliced open were sagging downwards, raining their contents as they descended. Through the vents he had cut in them he could distinguish something, a mottled surface his blade had torn and which was the source of the viscous liquid. That layer was pierced by additional holes, lozenge shaped and anywhere in size from that of a small coin to a handbreadth. Each of the holes was moving, opening and closing with a motion that was repellently familiar. Coleman stared at them blankly, before understanding rushed in and he recognized the apertures as mouths. For a moment he felt the room around him tilt crazily. He reached his left hand to his forehead. “My God…”

With a sudden burst of speed, Dunn lunged forward and stabbed Coleman in the chest. The blade was a white shock. For a moment Coleman was propelled out of his body to a lightless place. When he returned, he had fallen to his knees and Dunn was holding forth. “—true,” he said. “The veil between the worlds is thinner here. With the proper preparations, the inhabitants of the other realm may be lured across, captured, and put to work. Their physical capabilities are limited, but what they offer in terms of knowledge… Their appetites, however, are considerable, and they require a rather specialized diet. Human sensation sustains them—the more intense,

the better the meal. Pain they find particularly satisfying. The agonies of the dying will keep them happy and compliant for days."

"Your… services…" Coleman panted. With each breath, his chest filled with white fire.

"No doubt some of my clients have taken comfort from their time with me," Dunn said. "They've certainly been more use here than at any other time in their lives. It's a pity," he continued. "I had hoped that you—an artist—might understand the work in which I am engaged here. It was not my intention for your stay to end this way. But since it has, and since you have deprived my friends of their meal…" Dunn surveyed the balloons at the head of the table, the pair at its foot. The injuries of the nearer balloons did not appear as grave; indeed, while Dunn had been speaking, they had drifted closer to him. Through the rents in their paper cages, Coleman could see their excess of mouths gulping with a motion that reminded him of hungry fish at the surface of a pool. Dunn said, "Your attempt at gallantry has cost me more than you can conceive."

Coleman's shirt and trousers were warm, sticky, heavy with the blood emptying him. The library paled almost to blank, then returned. "As," he said to Dunn, "as… a gentle—gentleman… I wonder if… if you…"

"You must be joking," Dunn said; nonetheless, his bulk inclined toward Coleman.

Gripping its hilt as tightly as he could, Coleman slashed the rapier across Dunn's face. As he did so, something broke loose inside him and a tide of blood poured from the wound in his chest. He let go of the sword and fell beside it.

A thin, high-pitched scream rose from Dunn's throat. Coleman's sword had raked his eyes, and his cheeks were wet with blood and fluid. He had dropped the saber and held his hands up on either side of him, as if imploring some supernatural agency to his aid. Still screaming, Dunn crashed into the table with such force that it jolted across the floor. He staggered back from the collision, lost his footing, and tumbled down.

The balloons were waiting for him. Their prisons ruptured, the creatures they had contained surged out of them and over Dunn. His vision was failing, but Coleman had the impression of something more liquid than

solid, enough like a jellyfish to warrant the comparison. Dunn's voice climbed higher, then failed. He clawed at the things on his chest, but that only allowed them to attach to his hands. With what must have been herculean effort, Dunn sat up. His lips were forming words Coleman could not hear. Before he had uttered more than a few of them, one of the creatures spread itself over his face. His body shook as if with a seizure, then sagged backwards. In the quiet that followed, Coleman heard the noises of eating. Apparently the balloons' prisoners were capable of taking their nourishment more directly.

The library faded a second time. When it returned, it was less distinct. Coleman guessed more of his blood was outside his body than remained in it. How odd to die so quickly. How odd to die in a library. In some ways it was as appropriate a location as any. He hoped that Isabelle had managed to get Cal out of the house. He had waited too long to take her concerns seriously and try to aid her; he hoped it wouldn't be held against him. He wasn't much of a believer in an afterlife, hadn't been for decades. He supposed he'd been mistaken. He wondered what he should expect. Whatever it was, he hoped it wouldn't be hungry.

14

From *Benét's Reader's Encyclopedia* (third edition):

> **Coleman, Mark Stephen** (1842-1888). American novelist and short story writer. Born in Kingston, New York, Coleman left for study at Cambridge at the age of eighteen and spent almost the entire rest of his life abroad, living successively in London, Paris, Venice, and then London again before returning to the Hudson Valley in his final months. Like Henry James, with whom he is often compared, Coleman took as his subject the experiences of Americans in Europe; however, Coleman's Americans are plagued by remorse of past sins personal and familial, a preoccupation that links his work to that of Nathaniel Hawthorne. His most famous novel is *Belgrave's Garden* (1879), an account of a wealthy American's attempt to cultivate the land on which his ancestor ordered a brutal massacre during the second Jacobite rebellion in 1745. Coleman's death was notorious: he died as a

result of an apparent duel with the spiritualist Parrish Dunn, who also was slain.

The Third Always Beside You

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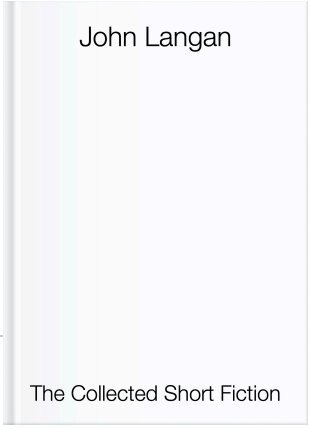

1

That there had been another woman in their parents' marriage was an inference that for Weber and Gertrude Schenker had taken on all the trappings of fact. During the most recent of the late-night conversations that had become a Christmas Eve tradition for them, Weber had christened the existence of this figure "The Keystone," for *her* and her intersection with their mother and father's marriage were what supported the shape into which that union had bent itself.

Over large-bowled glasses of white wine at the kitchen table, his back against the corner where the two window seats converged, Web met his eleven-months-younger sister's contention that, after all this time, the evidence in favor of *her* remained largely circumstantial by shaking his head vigorously and employing the image of the stone carved to brace an arch. Flailing his hands with the vigor of a conductor urging his orchestra to reach higher, which sent his wine climbing the sides of its glass, Web called to his aid a movie's worth of scenes that had led to their decision—during another Christmas Eve confab a decade earlier—that only the presence of another woman explained the prolonged silences that descended on the household without warning, the iciness that infused their mother's comments about their father's travels, the half-apologetic, half-resentful air that clung to their father after his trips like a faint, unpleasant smell. The other woman—*her,* the name custom had bestowed—was the stone that placed a quarryful of cryptic comments and half-sentences into recognizable arrangement.

As for why, ten years on, the two of them were no closer to learning *her* real name, much less any additional details concerning *her* appearance or

the history of *her* involvement with their father, when you thought about it, that wasn't so surprising. While both their parents had insisted that there was nothing their children could not tell them, a declaration borne out over thirty-one and thirty years' discussion of topics including Web's fear that his college girlfriend was pregnant (which, as it turned out, she wasn't) and Gert's first inkling that she might be gay (which, as it turned out, she was), neither their mother nor their father had asked the same openness of their children. Just the opposite: their parents scrupulously refrained from discussing anything of significance to their interior lives. Met with a direct question, their father became vague, evasive, from which Web and Gert had arrived at their secret nickname for him, the Prince, as in the Prince of Evasion. Their mother's response to the same question was simple blankness, from which her nickname, the Wall, as in the Wall of Silence. With the Prince and the Wall for parents, was it any wonder the two of them knew as little as they did?

Web built his case deliberately, forcefully—not for the first time, Gert thought that he would have made a better attorney than documentary filmmaker. (They could have gone into practice together: Schenker and Schenker, Siblings in Law.) Or perhaps it was that he was right, from the necessity of the other woman's existence to their parents' closed-mouthedness. Yet if the other woman was the Keystone, her presence raised at least as many questions as it answered, chief among them, why were their mother and father still together? A majority of their parents' friends—hell, of their parents' siblings—were on their second, third, and in one case fourth marriages. If their mother and father were concerned about standing out in the crowd, their continued union brought them more sustained attention than a divorce, however rancorous, could have. Both their parents were traversed by deep veins of self-righteousness that lent some weight to the idea of them remaining married to prove a point—especially to that assortment of siblings moving into the next of their serial monogamies. However, each parent's self-righteousness was alloyed by another tendency—self-consciousness in their mother's case, inconstancy in their father's—that, upon reflection, rendered it insufficient as an explanation. Indeed, it seemed far more likely that their mother's almost pathological concern for how she was perceived, combined with their father's proven inability to

follow through on most of his grandiloquent pledges, had congealed into a torpor that caught them fast as flies in amber.

It was a sobering and even depressing note on which to conclude their annual conversation, but the clock's hands were nearing 3 a.m., the second bottle of wine was empty, and while there was no compulsion for them to rise with the crack of dawn to inspect Santa's bounty, neither of them judged it fair to leave their significant others alone with their parents for very long. They rinsed out their glasses and the emptied bottles, dried the glasses and returned them to the cupboard, left the bottles upended in the dishrack, and, before switching off the lights, went through their old ritual of checking all the locks on the downstairs windows and doors. Something of a joke between them when their family first had moved from Westchester to Ellenville, the process had assumed increased seriousness with an increase of home invasions over the last several years. When they were done, Web turned to Gert and, his face a mask of terror, repeated the line that concluded the process, cadged from some horror movie of his youth: "But what if they're already inside?" Gert, who had yet to arrive at a satisfactory response, this year chose, "Well, I guess it's too late then."

The fatalism of her answer appeared to please Web; he bent to kiss her cheek, then wound his way across the darkened living room to the hallway at whose end lay the guest room for which he and Sharon had opted—the location, Gert had reflected, the farthest possible distance from their parents' room but still in the house. This had left her and Dana the upstairs room, her old one, separated from her mother and father's bedroom by the upstairs bathroom. Gert could not decide whether Web's choice owed itself to a desire to maintain the maximum remove from their parents for his new wife and himself, or was due to an urge to force the closest proximity between her and Dana and her parents, who, seven years after Gert's coming out and three years since she'd moved in with Dana, were still not as reconciled to their daughter's sexuality as they claimed to be. Of course, Web being Web, both explanations might have been true. Since sometime in his mid-to-late teens, the closeness with which he had showered their mother and father, the hugs and kisses, had been replaced with an almost compulsive need for distance—if either parent drew too near for too long, tried to prolong an embrace, he practically vibrated with tension. At the

same time, he had inherited their parents' self-righteousness and, given an opportunity to confront them with what he viewed as their shortcomings, was only too happy to do so. If Gert was uncomfortable, it wasn't in the plastic pleasantness that her mother and father put on whenever she and Dana visited, to which she'd more or less resigned herself as the lesser of many evils; it was in being fixed to the point of the spear with which Web wanted to jab their parents.

As she mounted the stairs to the second floor, she wondered if Web was anxious about his marriage going the way of their mother and father's, if his need for the downstairs room was rooted in anxiety about him and Sharon being contaminated by whatever had stricken their parents. It wasn't only their behavior that displayed the souring of their union. Physically, each appeared to be carrying an extra decade's weight. Their father's hair had fallen back to the tops of his ears, the back of his head, while their mother's had been a snow-white that she refused to dye for as long as either of their memories stretched. Their parents' faces had been scored across the forehead, to either side of the mouth, and though they kept in reasonable shape, their mother with jogging, their father racquetball, the flesh hung from their arms and legs in that loose way that comes with old age, the skin and muscle easing their grip on the bones that have supported them for so long, as if rehearsing their final relaxation. The formality with which their parents treated hers and Web's friends buttressed the impression that she and her brother were a pair of last-minute miracles or accidents. Without exception, Gert's friends had been shocked to learn that her mother and father were, if not the same age as their parents, then younger. She thought Web had received the same response from his classmates and girlfriends.

Although she swung it open gently, the hinges of the door to her and Dana's room shrieked. *No sneaking around here.* In the pale wash of streetlight over the window, she saw Dana fast asleep on her side of the bed, cocooned in the quilt that had covered it. Leaving the door open behind her, Gert crossed to the hope chest at the foot of the bed and unlatched it. The odor of freshly laundered cotton rose to meet her, and along with it came the groan of the floorboards outside the door.

"Mom?" She stood. "Dad?" The hall sounded with whichever of them it was hurrying to their room. Gert waited for the hinges on their door to

scream, wondering why they hadn't when whoever it was had opened it. After ten years of promising to do so, had her father finally oiled them? She listened for the softer snick of their door unlatching. She could feel someone standing there, one hand over the doorknob, their eyes watching her doorway for movement. "For God's sake…" Five steps carried her out into the hall, her face composed in an expression of mock-exasperation.

The space in front of the door to her parents' bedroom was empty, as was the rest of the hallway. For a moment Gert had the sensation that she was *not* seeing something, some figure in the darkness—the feeling was kin to what she had experienced looking directly at the keys for which she was tearing up the apartment and not registering them—and then the impression ceased. The skin along her arms, her neck, stood. *Don't be ridiculous,* she told herself; nonetheless, she made certain that the door to her room was shut tight. Later on, she did not hear footsteps passing up and down the hallway.

2

Gert's decision to pursue the question of the other woman, to ascertain her identity, was prompted not so much by that most recent Christmas Eve conversation as it was by a chance meeting with an old family friend in the din of Grand Central the week after New Year's. While waiting in line to purchase a round-trip ticket to Rye (where lived an obscenely wealthy client of her firm who insisted on conducting all her legal affairs in the comfort of her tennis-court of a living room), she felt a hand touch her elbow and a voice say, "Gertie?" Before she turned, she recognized the intonations of her Aunt Victoria—not one of her parents' sisters or their brothers' wives, but an old friend, perhaps their oldest, at a dinner party at whose house their father first had met their mother. With something of the air of its presiding genius, Aunt Vicky, Auntie V, had floated in and out of their household, always happy to credit herself for its existence and therefore, by extension, for hers and Web's. During Gert's teenage years, Victoria had been a lifesaver, rescuing her from her parents' seemingly deliberate lack of understanding of everything to do with her life and treating her to shopping trips in Manhattan, weekends at the south Jersey shore, even a five-day vacation on Block Island her senior year of high school. In recent years

Victoria's presence in their lives had receded, the consequence of her promotion to vice president of the advertising company for which she worked, but she was still liable to put in an appearance at the odd holiday.

Victoria's standing in the line was due to a speaking engagement with a sorority at Penrose College, in Poughkeepsie, to which she had decided it would be pleasant to ride the train up the east shore of the Hudson. She was dressed with typical elegance, in a black suit whose short skirt showed her legs fit as ever; and although her cheeks and jaw had lost some of their firmness of definition, her personality blazed forth, and Gert once more found herself talking with her as she would have one of her girlfriends. The result of their brief exchange was a decision to meet for lunch, which consultation with their respective Blackberries determined would occur a week from that Saturday; there was, Victoria said, a new place in NoHo she was dying to try, and this would provide the perfect opportunity. Gert left their meeting feeling as she always did after any time with Victoria: refreshed, recharged.

Not until the other side of her visit with Miss Bruce (ten minutes of business wrapped inside two hours of formalities), as she was watching the rough cut of Web's latest film on her laptop, did the thought bob to the surface of her mind: *Maybe Aunt Vicky was the other woman.*

The idea was beyond absurd: it was perverse; it was obscene. Victoria Godfrey had been a de facto member of their family, closer to the four of them than a few of their blood relations. She had been present during the proverbial thick, and she had been there through the proverbial thin. To suggest that she and Gert's father had carried on, were carrying on, an affair was too much, was over the top.

Try as she might, though, Gert could not banish the possibility from her thoughts. The same talents for analysis and narration that had placed her near the top of her class at NYU seized on the prospect of Auntie V being *her* and found that it made a good deal of sense. While both her parents had known Victoria, her father's friendship with her predated her mother's by several years. In fact, Victoria and her father had spoken freely of the marathon phone conversations with which they'd used to pass the nights, the restaurants they'd sought out together, the bands they'd seen in concert. Certainly, the connection between them had endured the decades. And

during those years, her father's consulting job had required him to travel frequently and far, as had Aunt Vicky's work, first in journalism and then in advertising. That Victoria, despite her declarations that all she wanted was a good man to settle down with, continued to live alone seemed one more piece of evidence thrown on top of what had suddenly become a sizable pile.

But her mother… Gert closed her laptop. In the abstract, at least, Gert long had admitted to herself the probability that her father had been unfaithful to her mother, perhaps for years. Restricting her consideration to her father and Aunt Vicky, she supposed she could appreciate how, given the right combination of circumstances, their friendship could have led to something else. (Wasn't that what had brought her and Dana together?) Factor her mother into the equation, however, and the sides failed to balance. Her father's relationship with Victoria might be longer, but her mother's was deeper; all you had to do was sit there quietly as they spoke to know that, while their conversation's focus might be narrow, it was anchored in each woman's core. Gert had no trouble believing her aunt might be involved with a married man if the situation suited her, but she could not credit Auntie V betraying one of her dearest friends.

Nonetheless, the possibility would not quit her mind; after all, how many divorces had she assisted or managed in which the immediate cause of the marriage's disintegration was a friend or even in-law who had gone from close to too-close? That the same story might have repeated itself in her parents' marriage nauseated her; without changing its appearance in the slightest, everything surrounding her looked wrong, as if it were all manifesting the same fundamental flaw. She shook her head. *All right,* she told herself, *if this is the truth, I won't run from it. I'll meet it head-on.* False bravado, perhaps, but what was her alternative?

A week and a half later, pulling open the heavy glass door to Lettuce Eat and stepping into its low roar of voices, Gert repeated to herself the advice that she gave the new lawyers: *Act as if you're in control, and you will be.* She had not been this nervous arguing her first case: her heart was thwacking against her chest; her palms were wet; her legs were trembling. In moments scattered across the last ten days, she had auditioned dozens of opening lines, from the innocuous (*Hi, Aunt Vic*) to the confrontational

(*What do you say we talk about you and my father?*); and although she hadn't settled on one (she was leaning toward *I'm so glad you came: there's something I'd like to talk to you about*), she was less concerned about the exact manner in which they would begin than she was with the substance of their talk. What she would do should Auntie V confirm the narrative whose principal points Gert had posited on a legal pad she hadn't shown anyone, she could not predict. Nor did it help matters any that Victoria, in addition to a black turtleneck and jeans, was wearing a pair of dark sunglasses, the necessity of which, she explained as she stood to kiss Gert, arose from an office party that had not ended until 5 a.m. "I'm not dead yet, by God," Victoria said as she resumed her seat and Gert took hers. "I can still give you kids a run for your money."

Gert answered her aunt's assertion with a polite smile that she maintained for the waitress who appeared at her side proffering a menu. In reply to the girl's offer to bring her something to drink, Gert requested a Long Island iced tea and focused her attention on the menu, whose lettuce leaf shape was printed with the names of eight lunch salads. After the waitress had left for her drink, Victoria said, "That's kind of heavy-duty for Saturday brunch, don't you think?"

"Oh?" Gert nodded at Victoria's Bloody Mary.

"Darling, this is practically medicinal. Really, if I thought my HMO would cover it, I'd have my doctor write a prescription."

Despite herself, Gert laughed.

"Now," Victoria continued, "you don't look as if you were sampling new cocktails till dawn, so that drink is for something else, isn't it? Everything okay with Dana? Work?"

"Fine," Gert said, "they're both fine. Couldn't be better."

"All right, then, how about your brother? Or—his wife, what's her name, again? Sharon?"

"Sharon's fine, too. Web is Web. He's working on a new film; it's about this painter, Belvedere, Thomas Belvedere. Actually," Gert continued, "there is something—in fact, it's something I need to talk to you about."

"Sweetie, of course. What is it?"

“It has to do with my parents.”

“What is it? Is everything okay? Nobody’s sick, are they?”

“Here you go,” the waitress said, placing Gert’s drink before her. “Do you know what you’d like to order?”

Gert chose the Vietnamese salad, which, Victoria said, sounded much more interesting than what she’d been thinking of, so she ordered one as well, dressing on the side. Once the waitress had departed, Victoria said, “The last time I saw your mother, I told her she was too skinny.”

“Nobody’s sick,” Gert said.

“You’re sure?”

“Reasonably.”

“Oh, well, thank God for that.” Victoria sipped her Bloody Mary. “Okay, everybody’s healthy, everybody’s happy: what do you want to discuss?”

The Long Island iced tea bit her tongue; Gert coughed, lowered her glass, then raised it for a second, longer drink. The alcohol poured through her in a warm flood, floating the words up to her lips: “It’s my dad. I need to talk to you about the other woman—the one he had the affair with.”

At NYU, the professor who had taught Gert and her classmates the finer points of cross-examination had employed a lexicon drawn from fencing to describe the interaction between attorney and witness. Of the dozen or so terms she had elaborated, Gert’s favorite had been the *coup droit*, the direct attack. As she had seen and continued to see it, a witness under cross-examination was expecting you to attempt to trick them, trip them up on some minor inconsistency. If the opposing counsel were conscious, they would have prepped the witness for exactly such an effort; thus, in Gert’s eyes, it was more effective (unexpected, even) to get right to the point. The strategy didn’t always succeed—none did—but the times it worked, a certain look would come over the witness’s face, the muscles around their eyes, their mouths responding to the words their higher faculties were not yet done processing, which Gert fancied was the same as the one you would have witnessed on the person whose chest your blade had just slid into. It was a look that mixed surprise, fear, and regret; when she saw it, Gert knew the witness, and probably the case, were hers.

It was this expression that had overcome Victoria's face. For an instant, she seemed as if she might try to force her way past it, pretend that Gert's question hadn't struck her as deeply as it had, but as quickly as it appeared to arise, the impulse faded. Her hands steady, she reached up to her sunglasses and removed them, uncovering eyes that were sunken, red-rimmed with the last night's extravagances. Trading her eyeglasses for her drink, Victoria drained the Bloody Mary and held up the empty glass to their waitress, passing near, who nodded to the gesture and veered toward the bar. With a sigh, Victoria replaced the glass on the table and considered Gert, who was helping herself to more of her drink, her mind reeling with triumph and horror. The thrill that sped through her whenever her *coup droit* succeeded carried with it a cargo of anguish so intense that she considered bolting from her chair and running out of the restaurant before the conversation could proceed any further. The next time she and Aunt Vicky saw each other, they could pretend this exchange had never happened.

But of course, it was already too late for that. Victoria was speaking: "How did you find out? Your father didn't tell you, did he? I can't imagine—was it your mother? Did she say something to you?"

"No one said anything," Gert said. "Web and I put it together one night—I guess it was ten years ago. We were up late talking, and the subject turned to Mom and Dad, the way it always does, and all their little… quirks. I said something along the lines of, *It's as if there's another woman involved,* and Web took that idea and ran with it. It was one of those things you wouldn't have dreamed could be true—well, I wouldn't have—but the more we discussed it, the more sense it made, the more questions it answered. Since then, it's something we've pretty much come to take for granted."

"Jesus," Victoria said. "Ten years?"

Gert nodded.

"And this is—why haven't you asked me about this before?"

"For a while, we were happy to let sleeping dogs lie. Web still is, actually; he doesn't know I'm talking to you. Recently I've—I guess I'm at a point where I want to know for sure, one way or the other. At least, I think I do."

"No, no," Victoria said, "you're right. You should know. I should've spoken to you—not ten years ago, maybe, but it's past time. You have to

understand—”

Whatever was necessary for Gert’s understanding was pre-empted by the return of their waitress with Victoria’s drink and their salads. Gert stared at the pile of bean sprouts, mango, banana, rice noodles, and peanut in front of her and thought that never had she felt less like eating. With each breath she took, her internal weather shifted sharply, raw fury falling into deep sadness, from which arose bitter disappointment. That she managed an “I’m fine, thanks” to the waitress’s “Can I bring you anything else?” was more reflex than actual response.

Before the waitress left, Victoria was sampling her next Bloody Mary. She did not appear any more interested in her salad than Gert was in hers. “All right,” Victoria said once she had lowered her glass. “I want—you need to remember that your father loves your mother. She loves him, too—despite everything, they love each other as much as any couple I’ve ever known. Promise me you’ll do that.”

“I know they love each other,” Gert said, although she could think of few facts in which she currently had less confidence.

“They do, honey; I swear they do. But your dad…” As if she might find what she wanted to say written there, Victoria’s eyes searched the ceiling. “Oh, your father.”

“Yes,” Gert said.

“Let me—When you were, you must have been two, your father spent about three days calling everyone he knew. Anyone he couldn’t reach by phone, he wrote to. All those calls, those letters, said the same thing: for the past seven years I have been having an affair. He had decided to end it, and the only way he was going to be able to follow through on that choice was if he came clean with all his family, all his friends, starting with your mother.”

Gert tried to imagine her father being that decisive about anything. “How did you feel about this?”

“In a word, shocked. It’s one of those times I can remember exactly where I was, what I was doing. I was in this sleazy motel outside D.C., prepping an interview with a guy who claimed he had dirt on the junior senator from New York. There was a single, coin-operated bed in the room that had the

most hideous green and orange spread on it. The walls were covered in cheap paneling and were too thin: for about an hour, I'd been listening to a couple on one side of me having drunken sex, and a baby on the other side of me wailing. Very nice. It was a little after nine o'clock; I had the TV on in an attempt to drown out the circle of life around me, and the theme from *Dallas* was playing. When the phone rang, I thought it was my editor, calling with yet another last-minute question. The senator already had a reputation as a vengeful son of a bitch, and my editor was nervous about any story that wasn't ironclad.

"Anyway, I heard your father's voice, and at first all I could think was, *How did he get this number?* Then I caught up to what he was saying and —" Victoria shook her head. "If you'd had a feather, you could have knocked me to the floor with it. I consider myself pretty perceptive. There isn't much that happens with my friends that I didn't see coming a mile away. But this…"

"What was it that surprised you?" Gert said.

"Are you kidding? Your father was cheating on your mother. He had been all through their relationship, their engagement, their marriage. Who does that? Okay, plenty of people, I know, but your father, he was—I guess you could say, he played the part of the devoted husband so convincingly… that isn't fair. He was devoted; it's just, he'd gotten himself into such a mess. I screamed at him: *What the fuck have you done, you asshole?* I mean, there was your mother with two little kids. What was she supposed to do?"

Was the alcohol slowing her comprehension? Gert said, "What about the other woman?"

"*Her.*" Victoria spat out the word as if it were a piece of spoiled meat. "I know," she said, holding up her hand to forestall the objection Gert wasn't about to make, "that isn't fair. It takes two and all, but…" Victoria slapped the table, drawing glances from the diners to either side of them. "She was already married, for Christ's sake! She had been for years."

"Did—did you know her?"

"No, which is funny, because she lived three doors down from me. This is back when I had the place on West Seventy-first. Over the years, I must have seen her God knows how many times, but I'd never paid any attention

to her. Why should I have? Little did I know she was—well, little did I know.

"That changed. Although it was after eleven when I finally hung up with your father, I was back on the phone right away. There was this guy, Phil DiMarco, a private investigator we used at the paper. He specialized in the cheating spouses of the rich and powerful; we turned to him whenever the rumor mill whispered that this politician or that movie star wasn't living up to their marriage vows. He was expensive as all hell, but he and I had this kind of thing, so he said he'd have a look around and get back to me."

"Why?" Gert said. "Why did you call a p.i.?"

"One of my oldest friends had just admitted that he'd been lying to me for years: not exactly a statement to inspire you with trust. Who knew if this was him coming clean, or some other lie? I was pissed off. I was afraid, the way you are for your friends when they're sliding down into something very bad. I felt sick. I kept thinking about your mom and you and your brother. This was when you were living in the house on Oat Street; I don't know if you remember it, but the front door was this gigantic thing you'd expect on a castle, not a modified Cape. It was ridiculous. Whenever I hauled it open, Web would shout, *Aunt Wicky!* and run at me on those chubby legs of his. You were much more reserved: you'd hide behind your mom with that bear, Custard, clutched to your chest like a shield, until she stepped aside and urged you forward. And now… your father had fucked up your lives royally. The whole situation was so unfair. I figured I could at least find out if he was telling the truth; it seemed like one thing I could do for your mother, for you."

"What did this Phil guy find out?" Gert asked. "Was my father telling the truth?"

"As far as Phil DiMarco was able to determine—he did a more thorough job than I'd expected, although he said he could take things further if I wanted him to, which I decided I didn't—anyway, yes, your dad had been honest with me, with us.

"Which was good," Victoria said. "I mean, it beat the alternative. But there was still the matter of what he'd been so honest about. There's no way you and Web could remember any of what followed the next year. Not to sound

melodramatic, but there are large portions of it I'd like to forget. There wasn't—it's difficult to see, to hear people you love in pain. And I did love both of them. Furious as I was with your father, he was still my friend who'd made a terrible mistake he was trying to set right. Your mother was—she'd been very happy with your father, with you and Web, with all you as a family, and then it was like…" Victoria waved her hand, a gesture for chaos, unraveling.

"How is everything?" Their waitress stood beside the table, nodding at their untouched salads.

"Wonderful," Victoria said.

"Are you sure?" the girl asked. "Because—"

"Wonderful," Victoria said. "Thank you."

While Victoria had been speaking, Gert had been aware of restraining her emotions; in the pause created by the waitress's interruption, a flood of feeling rushed through her. Gert could distinguish three currents in it: relief, regret, and dread. The relief, sweet and milky as chai, was that her Auntie V could remain her Auntie V, that Gert would not have to hate her for an error she had made decades prior. The regret, sour as a rotten lime, was that her father had in fact betrayed her mother, that her and Web's elegant theory had been incarnated into sordid fact. The dread, blank as water, was that she had not yet heard the worst of Victoria's story, a groundless anxiety that, the instant she recognized it, she knew was true.

Some of what she was feeling must have been visible on her face, set loose by the alcohol she'd dropped into her empty stomach; it prompted Victoria to say, "Oh, honey, I'm so sorry. This is too much, isn't it? Maybe we should change the subject, talk about the rest later."

Gert shook her head. "It's all right. I mean, it is a lot, but—go on, keep going. Tell me about the woman, the one my dad was with. What was her name?"

"Elsie Durant. Did I mention she was married? I did, didn't I? She was a few years older than he was; I can't remember exactly how much, six or seven, something like that. Coming and going from my apartment, I kept an eye out for her and managed to walk past her a couple of times. She was nothing special to look at: pointy nose, freckles, mousy hair that she wore

up. About my height, big in the hips, not much of a chest. When I saw her, she was dressed for work, dark pantsuits that looked as if she'd bought them off the rack at Macy's."

"How did they meet?"

"At a convention out west, in Phoenix, I'm pretty sure. Your dad was looking to drum up clients for his business, which was only a thing on the side back then. She was a sales rep for one of the companies he was hoping to snag. When they met, it was as professionals, and the fact that they both came from the same town was a coincidence to be exploited so he could continue his sales pitch. Their conversation led to drinks, which led to dinner, which led to more drinks, which led to her hotel room." Victoria shrugged. "You've attended these kinds of things, haven't you?"

Gert nodded.

"You know: a certain percentage of the attendees treat the event as an opportunity to hook up. It's like, while the cat's away, she's gonna play. If I were a sociologist, I'd do a study of it, try to work out the exact numbers.

"So your dad and Elsie started out as one more tacky statistic. They could've stayed that way if he hadn't called her the week after they returned from the convention—to follow up on the matters they'd discussed. Fair enough. He had a legitimate interest in securing this contract. It was just about enough to allow him to ditch his day job, and it was the kind of high-profile association that would put him on the map. Obviously, though…"

"His motives were ulterior."

Victoria smirked. "You might say that. I'm not sure if he knew that she was married, at first, but if he didn't, then he found out pretty soon. Her husband was a doctor, an endocrinologist at Mount Sinai. He was Polish, had immigrated when he was eighteen. In another instance of six degrees of separation, one of my friends was under his care for her thyroid. She said he was a great physician, but had all the personality of a pizza box."

"Did he know? About them?"

"I don't know. Your father insisted he must have, and it's hard to believe he didn't suspect something. Although apparently he was a workaholic, out

early in the morning, home late at night, busy weekends, so maybe he wasn't paying attention. Or could be, he was carrying on his own affair.

"To be honest," Victoria said, "there's a lot of this part of the story I have only the faintest idea of. The night your father called me, I wasn't especially interested in hearing the detailed history of his relationship with this other woman. Later on—when, I admit it, I was curious—encouraging him to revisit the details of his and Elsie's affair seemed less than a good idea. I have the impression that things were pretty intense at first, but aren't they always? If you're in the situation, it's—its own thing, fresh, new; if you're outside looking in, it's a movie you've seen one too many times. He wanted her to leave her husband. She promised she would, then changed her mind. He threatened to go to her husband. She swore she'd never speak to him again if he did. Eventually they settled into an unhappy routine. A couple of pleasant weeks would be followed by one or the other of them promising to break things off because of her marriage.

"After your father met your mother, he and Elsie didn't see each other for a while. Apparently she was pretty pissed at him for becoming involved with somebody else. Hypocritical, yes, but what's that line about contradicting yourself? I don't know why he returned to her, and I cannot understand how he continued the affair once he was engaged, and then married, to your mother. I gather their encounters had slipped from regular to occasional, but even so…"

"You must have asked him about it," Gert said.

"Oh, I did. He told me he'd been in love with two women. He had been, but he'd decided to make a choice, and that was your mother."

"Do you—?"

"Do I what? Think he was still in love with Elsie?"

"Yes."

"Your mother asked the same question," Victoria said. "She was obsessed with it. Of course your father had told her that she was the only woman he loved, but really, what else was he going to say and have any chance of her not leaving him? This left it to me to hash out with her whether he was telling the truth."

“You told her he was.”

“What else was I going to do? I knew that he loved your mother—that he loved you and your brother. If he and your mom could hang in there, gain some distance from what he’d done, I was sure they would work things out. Which they did,” Victoria said, “more or less.”

“You still haven’t answered the question.”

“You noticed that. Sweetie, I don’t know what to tell you. I thought he was fixated on her, mostly because he’d been unable to have her… completely, I guess you could say. Because she’d remained with her husband. I tend to think that isn’t love—it certainly isn’t the same as what he felt toward your mother.”

“But it could be as strong.”

“It could.”

“Obviously, Mom decided to stay with him,” Gert said.

“She told me your father had chosen her, and that was enough. Maybe she believed it, too—maybe it would have been, if—”

“What? If what?”

Victoria answered by draining the remainder of her Bloody Mary. Her heart suddenly jumping in her throat, Gert brought her own glass to her lips. The alcohol eased her heart back into her chest, allowing her to repeat her, “What?”

“That first year was bad,” Victoria said. “Your father spent months alternating between the couch—until your mom couldn’t stand having him around and ordered him out of the house—and a motel room—until your mom freaked out at the prospect of him there by himself and ordered him back to the house. There wasn’t much I could do for him: when I phoned, your mom wanted to speak with me, and it wouldn’t have worked for me to take him out somewhere. He had done wrong; it was his duty to suffer. Once in a while I would stop over and find your mother out; then I would have a chance to talk to him. Not that there was much to say. Mostly, I asked him how he was doing and told him to hang in there, your mom still loved him.

"Which was the same thing I said to your mom: *He loves you; he loves you so much; he's made a terrible mistake, but he loves you.* Nights your dad was home to watch you guys, I'd take her out. There was a little bar down the road from the house you were living in, Kennedy's—we'd go there and order girly drinks and she could say whatever she needed to. What didn't help matters any was that your father hadn't stopped traveling. In fact, he was gone more. He'd won that contract with Elsie's company, and their association had had exactly the effect he'd expected. By the time he met your mom, he was worth a couple of million; by the time you arrived, that amount had tripled. But whatever the money his firm brought in, it wasn't enough. (I swear, how he found the *time* to carry on an affair, I'll never know.) For about a month after he came clean on Elsie Durant, your dad put that part of his life on hold, turned the day-to-day running of the firm over to his number two guy. During that month, though, Number Two was on the phone to him at least three or four times a day, and in the end he made the decision to return. I wanted him to sell the business, take the money and invest it, live off that, but that was a non-starter."

Their waitress passing near, Victoria held up her glass.

"So… what?" Gert asked. "Was my father meeting this woman on his trips?"

"Not as far as Phil DiMarco could tell. Your dad went where he was supposed to, met with whom he was supposed to, and otherwise kept to himself. No clandestine meetings, phone calls, or postcards. His one indulgence was presents, mainly toys for you and your brother; although he brought back things for your mom sometimes. Most of it was jewelry, expensive but generic. Your dad's never had much taste when it comes to stuff like that; all your mom's nice jewelry is stuff I told him to buy for her. There was one thing he brought back for her, a little figure he found on a trip to, I think it was Utah of all places, that was kind of interesting. It was a copy of that statue, the Venus of Willendorf. It's this incredibly old carving of a woman, a goddess or fertility figure, or both, all boobs and hips. The copy had been done in this grainy stone, not sandstone but like it, coarser. It was just the right size to sit in your hand."

"Okay," Gert said, "I'm lost."

“Here you are.” Their waitress placed a fresh Bloody Mary beside Victoria and removed the empty glass. “How is everything?”

“Wonderful,” Victoria said. This time, the waitress did not pursue the matter, but smiled and departed. Looking over the rim of her drink, Victoria said, “By your third birthday, your parents were—I wouldn’t say they were back to normal, but they were on the mend. Finally. And then, one afternoon, the phone rings. Your mom picks it up, and there’s a woman on the other end. Not just any woman: her, Elsie Durant.”

“No.”

“Yes. She said, *My name is Elsie Durant. I know you know who I am. I’m sorry to call you, but I need to speak to your husband. ”*

“What did Mom say?”

“What do you think? *What the fuck are you doing calling here, you fucking bitch? Haven’t you done enough?* She was so angry, she couldn’t relax her grip on the phone enough to slam it down—which gave Elsie the time to say, *Please. I’m dying. ”*

“No.”

“Yes.”

“What kind of… ?”

“I know,” Victoria said. “Your mother said the same thing, *How stupid do you think I am?* But the woman was ready for her. She told your mother she’d sent a copy of her latest medical report to your parents’ house, along with her most recent X-ray. Your mother would have it tomorrow, after which she could decide what she wanted to do.”

“Which was?”

“To start with, she called me and asked me what I thought. I said she should forget she’d ever spoken to the woman and find out what she’d have to do to have her blocked from phoning them. What about the report, the X-ray? *Don’t even open that envelope*, I said. *Take it out back to the barbecue and burn it. ”*

“She didn’t.”

“She didn’t. As I’m pretty sure Elsie Durant must have known, the lure of that plain brown envelope was too much. She tore it open and learned that the woman who had been the source of so much pain in her marriage was suffering from *glioblastoma multiforme*. It’s the most common type of brain cancer. It’s aggressive, and there were fewer options for treating it then than I imagine there are now. The patient history included with the report revealed that Elsie hadn’t sought out treatment for her headaches until the tumor was significantly advanced. As of this moment, she was down to somewhere between six weeks and three months; although three months was an extremely optimistic prognosis. When your mother held up the X-ray to the light, she could see the thing, a dark tree sending its branches throughout the brain.”

Gert said, “She told him.”

“She did. How could she not? That was what she said to me. *How could I keep this from him? She’s dying.* It was too much for her to keep to herself. I would lay money that bitch knew that was exactly how she’d feel.”

“What happened? Did my father see her?”

“He spoke with her. Your mother told him everything, and when she was finished, he went to the phone and called her.”

“What did he say?”

“I don’t know. Your mom walked away—”

“She what?”

“She couldn’t be there—that was how she put it to me.”

Gert found her drink at her lips. There was less left in it than she’d realized. When the glass was empty, she said, “You must have asked Dad what they talked about.”

“He wouldn’t tell me.”

“Why not?”

Victoria shook her head. “He wouldn’t say anything. He just looked away and kept silent until I changed the subject. At first I thought it might be too soon for him to discuss it, but no matter how much time elapsed he wouldn’t speak about it.”

“What about Mom? Did he ever tell her?”

“She refused to ask him. She said if he wanted her to know he’d tell her. I may be wrong, but I think he was waiting for her to ask him, which he would have taken as a sign that she had truly forgiven him.”

“While Mom was waiting for him to come to her as a sign that he had truly repented.”

“Exactly.”

“Jesus.” Gert searched for the waitress, couldn’t find her. “How long—after she and Dad spoke, how long did Elsie Durant last?”

“Two weeks.”

“Not long at all.”

“No.”

“How did they find out?”

“The obituary page in the *Times*, ” Victoria said. “I saw it, too, and let me tell you, I breathed a sigh of relief. As long as Elsie Durant was alive—not to mention, local—she was… I wouldn’t call her a threat exactly, but she was certainly a distraction. They could have moved, someplace out of state, but your father traveled as much as he ever had. With Elsie permanently out of the picture, I assumed your parents would be able to go forward in a way they couldn’t have before—free, I guess you might say, of her presence. I had half a mind to drop in her funeral, just to make sure she was gone.

“As it turned out, I got my wish.”

“You were there?” As soon as the question had left her mouth, its answer was evident: “For my father: you went to find out if he went.”

“Your mother was convinced he would attend. To be honest, so was I, especially after his silence about his and Elsie’s final conversation. Of course, I didn’t say this to your mom; to her I said there was no way he’d be at the funeral. I mean, if nothing else, the woman’s husband would be there, and wouldn’t that be awkward? She didn’t buy it. It was all I could do to convince her not to go herself. *For God’s sake,* I said, *stay home. Hasn’t this woman had enough of your life already? Why give her anything more?* That had more of an effect on her, but in the end I had to promise her that I

would attend. If anybody asked, I figured I could pass myself off as a sympathetic neighbor."

"Did my dad—"

"Yes. Elsie Durant's funeral was held upstate, at St. Tristan's, this tiny church about ten minutes from the Connecticut state line. It was a pretty place, all rolling hills and broad plains. I don't know what her connection to it was. The church itself was small, much taller than it was deep, so that it seemed as if you were sitting at the bottom of a well. The windows—some of the stained-glass windows were old, original to the church, but others were more recent—replacements, I guess. The newer ones had been done in an angular, almost abstract style, so that it was if they were less saints and more these strange assemblies of shapes.

"Your father and I sat on opposite sides at the back of the church, which still wasn't that far from the altar. The funeral was a much smaller affair than I'd expected: counting the priest and the altar boys, there were maybe ten or eleven people there. The rest of the mourners sat in the front pews. There was an older man with a broad back who appeared to be the husband, a cluster of skinny women who were either sisters or cousins of the deceased, and a couple of nondescript types who might have been family friends. Honestly, I was shocked at how empty the church was. I—it sounds silly, but Elsie Durant had been such a—she had loomed over your parents' lives, their marriage, over my life, too—she had been such a presence that I had imagined her at the center of all sorts of lives. I had pictured a church packed with mourners—maybe half of them her illicit lovers, but full, nonetheless. I was unprepared for the stillness of—You know how churches catch and amplify each sob, each cough, each creak of the pew as you shift to make yourself more comfortable. That was what her funeral was to me, an assortment of random sounds echoing in an almost-empty church.

"After the service was over, before they'd wheeled the coffin out, I snuck out and waited in my car. Not only did your dad shake Elsie's husband's hand—and say I can't imagine what to him—he accompanied the rest of the mourners as they followed the hearse on foot across the parking lot and into the cemetery. He stayed through the graveside ceremony, and after that was over, the coffin lowered into the ground, everybody leaving, he remained in place. He watched the workmen use a backhoe to maneuver the lid of the

vault into place. He watched them shovel the mound of earth that had been draped with a green cover into the hole. Once the grave was filled and the workers had heaped the floral arrangements on top of it, he held his position. Finally I had to go: I hadn't been to the bathroom in hours, not to mention I was starving. I left with him still standing there."

"He'd seen you—I mean, in the church."

"Oh, yes," Victoria said. "We'd made eye contact as soon as I sat down, glanced around, and realized he was directly across from me. I blushed, as if he were the one catching me doing something wrong, which irritated me no end. I kept my eyes forward for the rest of my time there—when I left, I stared at the floor."

"What did he say to you about it?"

"Nothing. We never discussed it."

"What? Why not?"

"I assumed he would call me; it was what he'd done before. And I was—frankly, I was too pissed off to pick up the phone myself."

"Because he'd done what you thought he would."

"Yes. But—"

"You were afraid of what he might say if you did talk."

"All things considered, wouldn't you have been?"

"What did you tell Mom?"

"Pretty much what I said to you: that he'd been at the back of the church and I'd left before he did."

"Did you mention him standing at the grave?"

"She didn't need to hear that."

"I assume they never talked about it."

Victoria shook her head. "No. She knew, and he knew she knew, but neither wanted to make the first move. Your mother discussed it with me—for years. I would come over and we would sit at the dining-room table—this was when you were in the house on Trevor Lane, the one with the tiny living room. However our conversation started, it always ended with her asking me what your father attending Elsie Durant's funeral meant.

Needless to say, she was certain she knew what his presence in that back pew had implied. Well, that's not it, exactly: she was afraid she knew its significance. Who am I kidding? So was I. Not that I ever let on to your mom. To her I said that your father hadn't been doing anything more than paying his respects. If he'd loved Elsie Durant that much, he never would have ended things with her; he wouldn't have elected to stay with your mom. All the while I was thinking, *What, are you kidding me? Maybe he changed his mind after he called things off. Maybe he wasn't the one who ended the affair: maybe she did, and in a fit of pique he made his confessions. Maybe—God help me—he was in love with two women at once.* The possibilities were—it would be an exaggeration to say that they were endless, or even that they were all that many, but they were enough.

"We would make our way through a bottle of red, repeating what had become a very familiar argument. Your mom would have the little statue—the souvenir your dad had brought her, the Venus of Willendorf—in one hand. While we talked, she'd turn it over in her palm—by the end of the night, her skin would be raw from the stone scraping it. On more than one occasion, that statue's pores were dotted with blood.

"After one of those conversations, I had a nightmare—years later, and I can recite it as clearly as if I'd sat up in my bed this very minute. Your mom and dad were standing in a dim space. It was your house—it was all the houses you'd lived in—but it was also a cave, or a kind of cave. The walls were ribbed, the gray of beef past its sell-by date. Your parents were dressed casually, the way they were sitting around the house on a Sunday. They looked—the expressions on their faces were—I want to say they were expectant. As I watched, each held out an arm and raked the nails of their other hand down the skin with such force they tore it open. Blood spilled over their arms, streaming down onto the floor. When enough of it had puddled there, they knelt and mixed their blood with the material of the floor, which was this gray dirt. Once they had a thick mud, they started pressing it into a figure. It was the statue, the Venus, and the sight of it sopping with their blood shot me out of sleep.

"You don't need to be much of a psychiatrist to figure out what my dream was about; although, given how your parents have been looking these past few years, I sometimes wonder if it wasn't just a little bit predictive. But I

think about them—I have thought about them; I imagine I'll keep thinking about them—alone in that big house with that space between them, that gap they've had all these years to fill with their resentments and recriminations. Visiting them, there have been times I've been sure I could feel… I don't know what. A something there in the house with us. Not a presence—a ghost, no, I don't think they're being haunted by the spirit of Elsie Durant, but something else."

Gert thought of standing in the hallway looking at the door to her parents' room and not seeing anything there. She said, "What? What do you mean?"

Victoria said, "I don't know."

Returned at last, the waitress took Gert's empty glass and her request for another with an "Of course." Once she had left, Gert sat back in her chair. "So that's it," she said. "The outline, anyway. Jesus Christ. If anyone had bothered to talk to anyone else… Jesus."

Victoria remained silent until after the waitress had deposited Gert's second drink on the table and Gert had sampled it. Then she said, "I understand, Gertie. When I arrange everything into a story, it seems as if it would have been so easy for the situation to have been settled with a couple of well-timed, honest conversations. But when I remember how it felt at the time—it was like having been dumped in the middle of the ocean. You were trying to keep treading water, to keep your head above the swells. If we had all been different people, maybe we could have avoided this… It's quite the clusterfuck, isn't it?"

"It's my life," Gert said, "mine and Web's. This… what happened… what's still happening…"

"I understand," Victoria said. "I'm sorry; I'm so, so sorry. I don't know what else to say. I tried—we all tried. But—"

"Sometimes that isn't enough," Gert said. "It's just—why? Why did they stay together?"

"I told you, sweetie: your mom and dad love each other. That's… I used to think the worst thing in the world was falling out of love with someone. Now, though, I think I was wrong. Sometimes you can stay in love with them."

3

One week after her lunch with Aunt Veronica, well before she had come to terms with much if any of what they'd discussed—well before she'd shared the details of Elsie Durant with Dana—Gert found herself opening the front door to her parents' house. She had spent the day a few miles up the road, surrounded by the luxury of the Mohonk Mountain House, at which she'd been attending a symposium on estate law that seemed principally a tax-cover for passing the weekend at Mohonk. While Gert could have stayed at the hotel—which would have allowed her to continue talking to the attractive young law student with whom she'd shared dinner and then an extensive conversation at the hotel bar—she had arranged to stay at her parents', whom she'd felt a need to see in the flesh since Aunt Vicky's revelations. That need, together with a sudden spasm of guilt over having spent so long in the company of another woman so clearly available when Dana was at home working, sped her to the hotel's front portico, where a valet fetched her Prius without remarking the lateness of the hour. Her reactions slowed by the pair of martinis she'd consumed, Gert had navigated the winding road down from the mountain with her palms sweaty on the wheel. With the exception of a pair of headlights that had followed her for several miles, while she worried that they were attached to a police car, the drive to her parents' had been less exciting.

Now she was pushing the door shut behind her, gently, with the tips of her fingers, as she had when she was a teenager sneaking home well after her curfew's expiration. She half expected to find her mother sitting on the living-room couch, her legs curled under her, the TV remote in one hand as she roamed the wasteland of late-night programming. Of course, the couch was empty, but the memory caused Gert to wonder if her mother hadn't been holding something in her other hand, that weird little statue that seemed to follow her around the house. She wasn't sure: at the time, she had been more concerned with avoiding her mother's wrath, either through copious apologizing or the occasional protest at the unfairness of her having to adhere to a curfew hours earlier than any of her friends'. Had her mother been rolling that small figure in her palm, or was this an image edited in as a consequence of Auntie V's disclosures?

The air inside the house was cool, evidence of her father's continuing obsession with saving money. His micro-management of the heating had been a continuing source of contention, albeit of a humorous stripe, between him and the rest of the family. Shivering around the kitchen table, Web and she would say, *You know how much you're worth, right?* which would prompt their father to answer, *And how do you suppose that happened?* to which Web would reply, *You took all those pennies you saved on heating oil and used them to call the bank for a loan?* at which he, Gert, and Mom would snort with laughter, Dad shake his head. Gert decided she would keep her coat and gloves on until she was upstairs.

Halfway across the living room, she paused. The last time she had stood in this space, the Christmas tree had filled the far right corner, its branches raising three decades' worth of ornaments, its base bricked with presents. Together, she and Dana, Web and Sharon, Mom and Dad had spent a late morning that had turned into early afternoon opening presents, exchanging Christmas anecdotes, and consuming generous amounts of Macallan-enhanced eggnog. It had been a deeply pleasant day, dominated by no single event, but suffused with contentment. *Except,* Gert thought, *that all the time, she was here with us. Elsie Durant. She watched Dana tear the wrapping from the easel Mom and Dad bought her. She sat next to me as I held up the new Scott Turow Web had given me. She hovered behind Sharon at the eggnog.*

Nor was that all. Elsie Durant had been present at the breakfast table while she, Web, and their mother had teased their father about his stinginess. During the family trips they had taken, she had accompanied them, walking the streets of Rome, climbing the Eiffel Tower, staring up at the Great Pyramid of Giza. As Gert had walked down the aisle at her high school graduation, Elsie Durant had craned her neck for a better look; when Web's first film had played over at Upstate Films, she had stood at the front of the line, one of the special guests. Every house in which they had lived was a house in which Elsie Durant had resided, too, as if all their houses had possessed an extra room, a secret chamber for their family's secret member.

A sound broke Gert's reverie, a voice, raised in a moan. She crossed to the foot of the stairs, at which she heard a second, louder moan, this one in a different voice from the first—a man's, her father's. Her foot was on the

first stair before she understood what she was listening to: the noises of her parents, making love. It was not a chorus to which she ever had been privy; although Web claimed to have eavesdropped on their mother and father's intimacy on numerous occasions, Gert had missed the performances (and not-so-secretly, thought Web had, as well). Apparently freed of the inhibitions that had stifled them while their children were under their roof, her parents were uttering a series of groans that were almost scandalously expressive; as they continued, Gert felt her cheeks redden.

The situation was almost comic: she could not imagine remaining in place for the length of her mom and dad's session, which might take who knew how long (was her father using Viagra?), but neither could she see creeping up the stairs as a workable option, since at some point a stray creak would betray her presence, and then how would she explain that? After a moment's reflection, Gert decided her best course would be to play slightly drunker than she was, parade up the stairs and along the hall to her room as if she'd this minute breezed in and hadn't heard a thing. Whether her parents would accept her pretense was anyone's guess, but at least the act would offer them a way out of an otherwise embarrassing scenario.

To Gert's surprise and consternation, however, the clump of her boots on the stairs did not affect the moans emanating from the second floor in the slightest. Unsure if she were being loud enough, Gert stomped harder as she approached the upstairs landing, only to hear the groans joined by sharp cries. *Oh, come on,* she thought as she tromped toward her room. Was this some odd prank her parents were playing on her? They couldn't possibly be this deaf, could they?

She supposed she should be grateful to learn that her mother and father had remained intimate with each other, despite everything, despite Elsie Durant. Yet a flurry of annoyance drove her feet past the door to her bedroom, past the door to the bathroom, to the door to her parents' room, open wide. She had raised her hands, ready to clap, when what she saw on the big bed made her pause, then drop her hands, then turn and run for the front door as fast as her legs would carry her. Later, after a frantic drive home, the fact that she had not tripped down the stairs and broken her neck would strike her as some species of miracle.

Of course, Dana would awaken and ask Gert what she was doing home, wasn't she supposed to be staying at her parents'? The smile with which Gert greeted her, the explanation that she had missed her lover so much she had opted to return that night, were triumphs of acting that brought a sleepy smile to Dana's lips and sent her back to bed, satisfied. *I am my father's daughter.* On top of the tall bookcase in her office, dust clung to a bottle of tequila that had been a gift from a client whose divorce Gert's management had made an extremely profitable decision. She retrieved it, wiped the dust from it, and carried it through to the kitchen, where she poured a generous portion of its contents into a juice glass. She had no illusions about the alcohol's ability to cleanse her memory of what she'd seen: the image was seared into her mind in all its impossibility; however, if she were lucky, its potency would numb the horror that had crouched on her all the drive back. At her first taste of the liquor, she coughed, almost gagged, but the second sip went down more smoothly.

3

The streetlight that poured through the tall windows in her parents' room reduced its contents to black and white. The king-size bed at its center was a granite slab, the figures on it statues whose marble limbs enacted a position worthy of the *Kama Sutra*. Startled as Gert was by her mother and father's athletics, she was more shocked by their skin taut against their joints, their ribs, their spines, as if, in the few weeks since last she had seen them, each had shed even more weight. In the pale light, their eyes were blank as those of Greek sculptures.

There seemed to be too many arms and legs for the couple writhing on the bed. Her father stroked her mother's cheek with the back of his hand, and another hand lingered there, brushing her hair behind her ear. Her mother tilted her head to the right, and another head moved to the left. Her parents arched their backs, and in the space between them a third figure slid out of her father and into her mother with the motion of a swimmer pushing through the water. While her mother braced her hands on the mattress, the figure leaned forward from her and drew its hands down her father's chest, then turned back and cupped her mother's breasts. Her parents responded to the figure's caresses with a quickening of the hips, with louder moans and

cries that might have been mistaken for complaints. In the space between her mother and father, Elsie Durant drew herself out of their conjoined flesh, the wedge that braced their marriage, the stone at its heart.

Renfrew's Course

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John Langan

The Collected Short Fiction

"So this is the wizard," Neil said.

"Supposedly," Jim said.

Six feet tall, the statue had been carved from wood that retained most of its whiteness, even though the date cut into its base read 2005, seven years ago. Jim thought the color might be due to its not having been finished—splinters stood from the wood's uneven surface—but didn't know enough about carpentry to be certain.

"Looks kind of Gandalf," Neil said.

He was right. The wide-brimmed hat, long beard, staff, and robe all suggested Tolkien's character, an impression the squirrel at the figure's left foot, fox behind its right, owl on its shoulder did little to argue.

"I know," Jim said. "It's like that statue of William Wallace—did I tell you about that? They wanted to put up a new statue of Wallace—somewhere out near Stirling, I think—so what did the artist come up with? Mel Gibson in *Braveheart*."

"No wonder there're so few Jews in Scotland."

"Apparently, the real guy was much stranger."

"Gibson? I know," Neil said, starting up the hill toward the dirt path that would take them into the nature preserve.

"No, the wizard." Once he had caught up to Neil and they were walking under the tall pine and oak, Jim continued, "In one story, the king of France was causing some kind of difficulty for the local merchants—an embargo, I think. Michael Renfrew mounted his iron horse and in a single bound crossed the distance from Kirkcaldy to Paris. When he showed up at the French palace, its doors flew open for him. The king's guards found their swords red hot in their hands. Needless to say, Louis-the-whatever changed his mind, and quickly at that."

“An iron horse, huh?”

“Legend says you can still see its hoof print on the cliff it leapt off.”

To their right, separated from them by dense rows of pine, a stone tower raised its crenellated head above the tree line. “See?” Jim said, pointing to it. “Over there—that’s Renfrew’s keep.”

“Which has seen better days.”

“It’s like seven hundred years old.”

“So’s Edinburgh Castle, isn’t it?”

“Anyhoo,” Jim said, “Renfrew only stayed there part of the time. He was the court astrologer for the Holy Roman Emperor.”

Neil grunted. No longer angry about the Rose incident, neither was he all the way over it. Had he been familiar with Scotland, he might have gone off for a few days on his own and left Jim to worry about what he was up to, whom he was having long, heartfelt conversations with over steaming mugs of chai. The trip, however, had been Jim’s baby, a chance to share with Neil the place in which he’d passed the summers of his childhood while also promoting his surprisingly successful book. Neil could not make sense of the timetables for the trains or buses, and as for driving on the other side of the road, forget it. He had no choice but to remain with Jim and his revelation about his *affaire de coeur* with Rose Carlton, which he had dealt with from inside a roiling cloud first of anger, then pique. Jim met this change in their personal weather the way he always did, the way he always had, by talking too much, filling the charged air with endless facts, opinion, speculation.

Not for the first time, the irony of his book’s title, *The Still Warrior*, struck him. How often had he urged his students at the dojo not to be afraid of their own quiet, of remaining in place, controlling their sparring bouts by forcing their opponents into committing to action first? It was a perspective he’d spent one hundred and forty-eight pages applying to a wide range of activities and situations, and based on the early sales figures, it was a viewpoint in which a significant portion of the reading public was interested. Look at his life off the dojo’s polished hardwood, though, and he might as well have been writing fiction, fantasy rooted in the deepest wish-fulfillment. Especially when it came to Neil, he was almost pathologically

unable to leave things be, let the kinks and snarls in their relationship work themselves out, as the vast majority of them likely would. Instead, he had to plan excursions like this one, a walk along a nature path that was supposed to bring them… what? Closer? “You can’t make a scar heal any faster,” Neil had said, which Jim wasn’t sure he believed but which Neil certainly did.

Ahead, the path was intersected by a secondary trail slanting up from the right. The new trail was little more than a disturbance in the forest’s carpet of needles, but Neil turned onto it. “Hey,” Jim said.

“I want to see where this goes.”

Neil knew he wouldn’t argue. *Prick.* Jim followed him off the main path and was seized by a vertigo so extreme he might have been standing at the edge of a sheer cliff, rather than a not especially steep trail. He leaned forward, and it was as if he were on the verge of a great abyss, an emptiness that was coaxing him forward, just one more step…

A hand gripped his arm. “Hey—you all right?” The voice was high, familiar.

Vision swimming, Jim said, “I don’t,” and heard the words uttered in a different—in what sounded like the voice on his and Neil’s videos of their old vacations, his voice of ten years ago.

The hand steadying him belonged to a young man—to Neil, he saw, Neil as he had been when Jim had met him at a mutual friend’s Y2K party. His hair was down to his shoulders and, as was the case when he let it grow, both more curly and a shade closer to strawberry blond. The lines on his face were not cut as deep, and his skin was pale from a life lived in front of the computer. Mouth tucked into the smirk that had first caught Jim’s notice, he said, “Steady,” and released Jim’s arm.

Jim raised his right hand and brushed the half-dozen earrings that climbed his ear. He could feel his own hair ponytailed along the back of his neck. “Oh my God,” he said.

“What is it?” Neil said.

“I—don’t you—”

“Maybe the mushrooms weren’t such a good idea.”

“Mushrooms?” Jim said, even as he was thinking, *Yes, mushrooms, because that’s the kind of shit you do now, at twenty-five, psilocybin and pot and occasionally hash and once in a great while a little E, because you’re still five years away from the ambush of turning thirty, when you’ll throw away all this stuff and more besides—soda, fast food, desserts—in favor of Shotokan karate seven days a week, fifty-two weeks a year. That’s the future: right now, you’re pursuing your private version of the systematic derangement of the senses.*

“Man,” Neil said, “I guess those things were strong. I’ve never seen you like this before. Wish they would do something for me.” He waved his hand in front of his eyes. “Nada.”

“We—how did we get here?”

“We walked.”

“No, I mean Kirkcaldy—Scotland.”

“Wow.”

“How did we get here?”

“Easy, there, easy,” Neil said. “Work exchange, remember? I’m over here six weeks, that guy—Doug Moore, right?—is enjoying life in NYC. You tagged along because—well, because you’re cute and I like you. Okay?”

Of course that was the case. The moment Jim heard Neil’s explanation, he realized he already knew it. Cheeks burning, he said, “Okay. I’m sorry, it’s just—those were some strong mushrooms.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah. I was having this whole fantasy that you and I were here, only in the future.”

“The future, huh? What were we like?”

“I had written this really popular book. We were here promoting it. You were… still programming, I think.”

“Oh, so you’re the famous writer and I’m just some computer nerd. Very nice.”

“Hey, you were my computer nerd.”

“Flattery.”

“It’s gotten me everywhere.”

“You’re feeling better.”

“I guess.”

“Good.” The expression on Neil’s face looked as if it might portend sex, a quickie amidst the trees, but he turned and continued down the secondary path. As Jim followed, he said, “Before you went all freaky, you were talking about the wizard, old Michael Renfrew.”

“I was? Yeah, I suppose I was. Look to your right, ahead and you’ll see Renfrew’s keep.”

“Where? Oh, yeah. What part is that?”

“Must be near the base. That’s—I think that’s a doorway. Hard to tell through the trees.”

“So what about Renfrew?”

“Did I tell you about the iron horse?”

“And the king of France, yeah.”

“There’s a story about him and the Devil.”

“Oh?”

“Or a devil: I can’t remember which. At some point, he summoned a devil. I’m not sure why. Maybe for knowledge, or maybe to prove his power. It’s one of those things magicians do all the time in old stories. Anyway, dealing with this guy was more dangerous than your run-of-the-mill evil spirit. If Renfrew could name a single task the devil could not perform, then he could make whatever use of him he wished for a year and a day. If not, the devil would pull him down to hell.”

“And?”

“Renfrew took him to the beach and commanded him to weave a rope out of sand.”

“Not bad. What did he have the devil do for him?”

“The story doesn’t say. It’s more concerned with him outsmarting the devil than with Renfrew using him for his personal gain.”

“Maybe that was how he got the iron horse.”

"Could be."

"Anything else?"

"Not really. He's supposed to have had something to do with this book, *Les Mystères du ver,* but I'm not sure what."

"*Les*—what?"

"*Les Mystères du ver* : *The Mysteries of the Worm*. It's some kind of evil book, Satanic Bible, witch's spell list, that sort of thing."

"*The Mysteries of the Worm,* huh? No wonder you're interested in this guy."

"Worm? Try snake."

"Somebody's overcompensating."

"Merely stating the facts."

Neil did not answer, and Jim could not think of a way to extend their banter that did not sound forced, banal. *It's all right,* he told himself. *Silence is all right. You don't always have to be talking*. Wasn't that one of the things that had attracted him to Neil in the first place, his ability to be comfortable in his own quiet? Even in the length of time they'd been together, hadn't he learned that Neil's sometimes prolonged periods of silence rarely had anything to do with them, that he was usually turning over some work-related problem? He didn't feel the need to fill the air with words, and if that made Jim anxious, that wasn't Neil's fault, was it?

Plus, the sex is fantastic.

Maybe fifteen feet in front of Neil, the path leveled off and was met by another, slanting down from the right to join theirs at an acute angle. When Neil turned at the junction and started up it, Jim said, "Hey."

"Come on," Neil said. "This should take us back to the main trail."

No arguing with that. This track appeared clearer than the one they'd just descended, more sharply defined. He followed onto it—and it was as if he'd tried to walk up a wall. The path rose above him, impossibly high; he staggered backwards, dropped onto his ass. The path loomed overhead, a dark strip of ground about to fall on him, and—

A silhouette leaned in front of him. “What happened?” The voice was flat, familiar.

Struggling against the urge to throw his hands in front of his face, protect himself from the collapse of dirt and rock, Jim said, “I don’t,” and was shocked to hear the fragment delivered in a voice whose underlying tones were his but which had been roughened, broadened.

The outline before him resolved into Neil, but a different Neil, a Neil whose face might have received the attentions of a makeup artist instructed to advance his age by twenty, twenty-five years. His hair was crewcut short. His skin was grooved across the forehead, beneath the eyes, to either side of the mouth. Under the open collar of his shirt, a faded line of green ink scaled the left side of his neck, the edge of a tattoo, Jim knew—remembered. Were he to look into a mirror, he would see its twin on the left side of his neck, a memento of the aftermath of the Rose Carlton incident, when he and Neil had sought a way to reaffirm their bond. The eclipse had been Jim’s idea, a symbol that, whatever events might darken their relationship, they would pass.

(Except that he’d developed a staph infection, which the tattooist, a mutual acquaintance, had spent days insisting could not be happening, he ran a clean shop, until Jim had wound up in the hospital, tethered to an IV antibiotic drip for a week. Nor had Neil moved past Rose, not really: every time an argument escalated to a certain pitch, he reached for her like a favorite weapon.)

“You all right?” Neil asked, the words tinted with something resembling concern.

He’s worried about my heart, Jim thought. *The infection affected my heart, weakened it*. (*What the hell is happening to me?*) “Fine,” he said, climbing to his feet. “I’m fine, just… a little lightheaded.” (*Is this some kind of long-term after-effect of being sick? Did it mess with my head?*) He gestured at the path. “Go on.”

“You’re sure?”

“Go.”

“Take it easy,” Neil said. “This isn’t a race.” Nonetheless, he hurried to keep in front. “Okay?” he called over his shoulder.

“Great.”

After a minute of trudging up the thick, rocky earth, Neil said, “Do you feel like continuing the story?”

“Story?”

“Story, chapter, whatever you want to call it. ‘Renfrew and the Giant.’”

Almost before he knew he was speaking them, Jim found the words at his lips. “Having endured Renfrew’s displays of power, the Giant was less than impressed by his offer of an alliance between them. He said, ‘Little man, you have already shown me that I have nothing to fear from you. Why should I cast my lot in with yours?’

“Although obviously exhausted, Renfrew stood straighter and answered, ‘Because you have everything to benefit if you do, and everything to lose if you do not.’

“At this, the Giant laughed, and it was the sound of an avalanche, of boulders crashing into one another. ‘Little man,’ he said, ‘your boldness does you credit. I will eat you quickly.’ He reached one enormous hand toward the wizard.

“Renfrew did not flinch. He said, ‘I know your name—your true name.’

“The Giant’s hand halted, inches from Renfrew. His vast brow lowered. ‘Impossible,’ he said. ‘I hid that where no man—no one might find it, ever.’

“‘Yes,’ Renfrew said, ‘in a cavern under a lake watched over by three mountains, locked inside a brass casket guarded by a basilisk. I have been there.’

“The Giant’s hand retreated. He said, ‘You read of this in one of your wizard’s books.’

“Renfrew said, “The sole means to open the casket is the tooth of a hydra, which is in the basilisk’s stomach. The casket contains a pale blue egg resting on a white pillow. To touch the egg is like touching a furnace; to hear its shell crack is like hearing your own death. Within the egg there is a stone into which has been carved a single word.’

“The Giant’s hand had retreated all the way to his great mouth.

“Renfrew said, ‘That word is *Mise*.’”

Neil said, “Meesh?”

“I think that’s how it’s pronounced. It’s Gaelic, means ‘I am.’”

“I am?”

“Yeah. The original story doesn’t say what the Giant’s true name was, only that Renfrew had discovered it and used it against him. I thought about making it something like ‘stone’ or ‘mountain,’ but that seemed too obvious.”

“Why?”

“Well, giants are big, you know; if you were going to associate them with anything, it would be a mountain.”

“I guess.”

“Anyway, it made sense to me that the Giant’s name would be his life, so, ‘I am.’”

“If you say so. Just as long as this one brings another big advance.”

Jim said, “Karen’s pretty optimistic. Post-Harry Potter, wizards and magic are big business in kids’ publishing,” even as he was thinking, *Karen Lowatchee, your agent, who repped you on* The Still Warrior *and, when the heart thing made you scale back karate, suggested you try fiction. She’d liked the chapters on karate for kids, said they showed a real grasp of tween psychology. She was the one who came up with the* Jenny Ninja *series title and got you the big advances for the last two. Neil calls her Glenda the Good Bitch; she calls him Microsoft.*

“What happens next?” Neil said.

“In the chapter? Renfrew turns the Giant into his keep.”

“That’s it?”

“That’s what happens in the original legend.”

“Yeah, but—couldn’t he have used the Giant first?”

“Invaded England with him?” Jim said.

“Something.”

“I don’t know. I kind of like the idea of Renfrew living inside the Giant, wandering around him, listening to the echo of his thoughts, his dreams.”

“Sounds pretty creepy, if you ask me.”

“And what’s wrong with that?”

“Isn’t this book supposed to be for kids?”

“It’s YA,” Jim said, “Young Adult. Older kids.”

Over the tops of the pines to their right, Renfrew’s keep raised its ragged crown. “See,” Jim said, pointing at it, “the windows look like eyes.”

“What has eyes like that?”

“It’s supposed to be a monster.”

“Aren’t giants big people?”

“Not all them. The ancient Greeks described giants with a hundred arms.”

“Where do you get this stuff?”

“Depends. The ancient Greek stuff’s available all over the place. Information on Renfrew is harder to come by. Mostly I use that website, Blackguide.com.”

“The one that crashed the computer?”

“I told you, it wasn’t that: it was all the porn you’d been looking at.”

“Very funny.”

Neil’s pace slowed. In front of him, their path intersected another sloping steeply down from the right. As he stepped onto it, Jim said, “Hey.”

“I’m pretty sure this’ll lead back to the beginning of the trail,” Neil said.

This place isn’t that big. I’m sure if I kept on a straight line, I’d come out on a side street eventually. However discouraging the prospect of an even more strenuous climb was, though, the inevitable spat that would result from him not following Neil, not to mention the two or three days after that before the situation returned to normal, prompted him up the new path. As he did so, his vision went dark. He had the impression of something huge in front of him, something vast hanging over him, like a wave, only solid, ready to crash down on him. He wanted to cry out, but his tongue was dead in his mouth; his heart lurched like a racehorse stumbling mid-stride.

Somewhere close by an old man’s voice said, “What is it? What’s the matter with you?” The words vibrated with rage, barely controlled.

What's Neil's father doing here? Jim thought. He tried to speak. "Mr. Marshall—"

"Don't Mr. Marshall me. I know who I am. I'm still lucid."

The host of the questions the outburst raised were silenced by the clearing of Jim's sight, which revealed Neil's face inches from his. Its angry expression was almost parodic: eyes wide and staring under lowered brows, top lip arched, teeth visible, chin jutting forward. It was also the face of a man in his mid-seventies. Neil's hair was white, as were his eyebrows; both hair and brows were thick, bushy. The lines across his forehead, to either side of his mouth, appeared cut right down to the bone, while his skin looked loose, its grip on his skull slipping. His gaze was fierce yet unfocused, as if he were unable to pinpoint the source of his rage; already, his lips were retreating from their snarl into the tremors that shook them incessantly.

The Alzheimer's, Jim thought. *That was the first symptom: before the memory loss, the mood swings, that spasm was telling us what was on the way*.

"What happened to you?" Neil said. "Is it your heart? Are you having another heart attack?" The emotion under his words was sliding into panic.

"I'm fine," Jim said. "Just caught up in…" *What? What do I call whatever's happening to me?* (*And, by the way, what the hell* is *happening to me? Is this some kind of stroke?*) "In a rather vivid daydream, I suppose —a memory, really, of one of our past visits here."

"Oh? Was that before or after you fucked Rose?"

"I didn't—"

"Yes, yes, that's what you always say; what you've always said."

"But you've never believed me, have you?"

"I don't know what I believe. I'm the one whose brain is disintegrating, remember?"

"It isn't," Jim started, then stopped. Technically speaking, Neil's brain wasn't disintegrating, but there were worse ways to describe what was happening to his personality, to the aggregate of memories and attitudes that composed Neil. Anyway, Neil already had turned his back on him and was

striding up the path. The disease might be wrecking his mind, but so far his vitality was undiminished. Jim labored not to fall too far behind.

Neil said, “Do you remember the end of Renfrew’s story?”

“Do you mean my book or the legend?”

“Which was which?”

“My book ends with Renfrew entering the cave at Wemyss in search of the path to the Graveyard of the Old Gods. He leaves Thomas, his apprentice, in charge until his return, which doesn’t take place during Thomas’s very long life, or that of his apprentice, or that of any of the men and women who have come since. However, the book says, that doesn’t mean that one day the old wizard won’t emerge from the mouth of the cave, squinting at the light, and begin the long walk back to his old home.”

“That wasn’t it.”

“You want the legend, then. That ends with a group of the Covenanters coming armed to Renfrew’s keep in order to arrest him on charges of sorcery. When they arrived, though, they found the place deserted, as if no one had lived there for decades, or longer.”

“That isn’t it, either.”

“I don’t—there’s a tradition, a kind of afterword to the legend proper, that if you follow a certain course through the woods around Renfrew’s keep—and if certain conditions are right: the stars are in alignment, that sort of thing; I think an eclipse is supposed to figure into the equation somehow—then Renfrew himself will appear to you and offer to teach you what he knows. Is that what you were thinking of?”

“Yes,” Neil said.

Jim waited for Neil to add something more; when he did not, he said, “What makes you ask?”

“Ask what?”

“About Renfrew’s course?”

“What about it?”

“You just asked me to tell you about it.”

“I did.” Neil shrugged. “I don’t remember that.”

There was no point in anger; though buttressed by his meds, Neil's short-term memory was far from perfect. Jim said, "You know what I was thinking?"

"How much longer you have to wait before you can put me in a home?"

"What? No, I told you, I'm not going to put you in a home."

"That's what you say now."

"That's what I have said—what I've been saying ever since you were diagnosed."

For a change, he hoped the silence that greeted his reassurance meant the subject of their debate had slipped through the sieve of Neil's immediate recollection. His quiet seemed to imply that it had, another moment caught in the plaque crusting his neurons, then he said, "I hope you and Rose will have the decency to wait until all my things have been moved out for her to move in."

"Neil—"

"It would be nice if you could wait until I'm in the ground, but I'm guessing I could hang on for a while, and you certainly aren't getting any younger. Neither is she; although she isn't as old as we are, is she? Maybe she'll be inclined to do the decent thing, but you won't, will you?"

"I'm sorry: I can't talk to you when you're like this."

Neil lengthened his stride, mountain-goating up the path. Jim didn't bother chasing after. Better to hang back and hope that, by the time he caught up, Neil's thunderstorm of emotions would have passed; though he wasn't sure what he rated the chances of that as. It had been years, almost a full decade, since he and Rose had seen each other, and that had been by accident, a chance encounter at the Union Square Barnes & Noble that had led to nothing more than the occasional email. If he hadn't told Neil about the meeting, or the correspondence, it was because, long after his whatever-you-wanted-to-call-it with her had receded in his memory, in Neil's mind it was a flame only recently and poorly extinguished, whose smoldering embers might yet ignite again. He would have made too much of the emails in which Jim told Rose about his visit to the set of the Renfrew film, Rose told him about her recent trip to Paris with her ninety-two-year-old mother,

mountained the molehills into a secret, ongoing affair. In the wake of Neil's illness, he supposed he had been writing to her more frequently, but his correspondence with all his friends and family had increased as his communication with Neil had grown more erratic.

He was almost at the top of the path. He had climbed higher than he'd realized; to his right and over his shoulder, he could look down on the roofless top of Renfrew's keep. To his relief, Neil was standing waiting for him. "There you are," Jim said—panted, really.

"Here I am," Neil said. His expression was almost kindly. "Need a minute?"

"Half a minute," Jim said, leaning forward. "Neil—"

At Neil's feet, their path formed an acute angle with another climbing up from the right. As he started down it, Jim said, "Hey."

"I can see the place where we started," Neil said, pointing.

Jim squinted. Was that the white of the wizard's statue? They would have to descend from here somehow, he supposed, and this new path, crossed by tree roots that formed an irregular staircase, was probably the best option he could expect. He stepped down, and it was like dropping into a well. There was the sensation of falling straight down, and the impression of everything flying up all around him, and the sound of roaring filling his ears. Terror swept through his chest, his head, made them sickeningly light. He flailed his arms. There was nothing under his feet; he was falling.

Something crashed into him from the front. He heard an "Oof!" and felt his direction change. Now he was moving forward, his arms and legs caught with someone else's, tangled, the pair of them thudding and scraping against rock and dirt. He rolled over and under, over and under his companion, then landed hard on his back, his right kidney shouting at the rock it came down on. Above him, the sky was a blue bowl someone had set spinning. He closed his eyes, and when he opened them, Neil was leaning over him. There was a cut high on his forehead leaking blood onto his brow, but aside from that and some dirt, his face was the same as it had been at the start of this strange walk, thirty-nine and looking it. "You klutz," he said. "Karate master, my ass."

Jim flung his arm around him, flinching as his back complained. “I’m sorry,” he said into Neil’s shoulder. “Are you okay?”

“You mean, aside from the gaping wound in my head? Yeah, I’m peachy.”

Jim released him. “I am so sorry,” he said as he struggled to his feet. “I just… I slipped.”

“And you couldn’t miss me on the way?”

“I didn’t want you to feel left out.”

Fighting it, Neil smirked. “You are such an asshole.”

“But I’m your asshole.”

“Enough shit comes out of you, anyway.”

“Ah, I’m sure a little single malt will help.”

“First sensible thing you’ve said all day.”

They had rolled almost halfway down the path; no surprise, given the bruises Jim could feel ripening under his shirt, his jeans, the scrapes visible on Neil’s arms, his neck. He supposed he should be grateful neither of them had broken a limb or been concussed. At least Neil had been right about this path returning them to the entrance to the nature preserve: through the trees, the wizard’s statue stood a pale beacon. As Neil stepped from tree root step to tree root step, Jim weighed telling him about his… what would he call them? Hallucinations? visions? waking dreams? Maybe “experiences” was the best word for them. Whatever: it was on the tip of his tongue to say that he had just relived their life together when they’d first met, then seen them at points another twenty and forty or so years in the future. *When I’m the author of a series of successful children’s books and he’s in mid-stage Alzheimer’s, not to mention still obsessing over Rose Carlton: yes, that would go over splendidly*.

Neil was drawing away from him. Strangest of all was that, now that the two of them were their proper selves, he was not more upset by what he had just been through, his experiences. (That still wasn’t the right word, but it would do for the moment.) While he had been at each of those other times, the moment had been as real as anything—that he had been wrenched from this specific point in his life had seemed as odd, as disorienting, as any other detail. Returned to the age at which he had entered the nature preserve

—the age he was supposed to be—Jim found his and Neil's alternate selves suddenly distant, novels he'd read years ago, their plots dim weights resting in the depths of his memory.

So what was all that? Some kind of projection? Easy enough to trace the roots of at least some of it to the current state of his and Neil's relationship. Future Neil's fixation on the Rose business arose from Jim's anxiety that, as time went on, he wouldn't be able to relinquish it. Jim's continued success as a writer was simple wish-fulfillment (although his agent had praised the sections of his book dealing with kids). Neil's grandfather had suffered from Alzheimer's, of which his father was showing early symptoms; from there, it was a short jump to imagining Neil eventually overtaken by it.

The vividness of everything, though, he could not account for. He had indulged in enough hallucinogens in his younger years; could this have been a delayed consequence of that? It seemed unlikely, but what was more likely? The place was the site of a ley-line that produced brief time-distortions? *Funny how all the tourist info fails to mention that*.

To his right, the lower stretch of Renfrew's keep was visible through the trees. Ahead, Neil was already at the statue. Legs protesting, Jim picked up his pace. Neil had stopped in front of the sculpture and appeared to be speaking to it. *That can't be good. Did I say neither of us was concussed?*

Jim did not see the man with whom Neil was talking until he was next to him. Standing on the other side of the statue, the man had been obscured from Jim's view by it. A head shorter than either of them, he wore his reddish hair short and a dark suit over an open-collared white shirt. Jim wasn't much for estimating the cost of things, but even he could recognize the quality of the man's clothes, which made the stains on his jacket cuffs, his shirt, all the more conspicuous. The man raised his eyes to Jim, and their green notice was a physical thing, a heaviness passing over him. "You're Jim," he said in a voice that was soft, accentless.

"Yes," Jim said, extending his hand. "You are… ?"

The man's hands were in his trouser pockets; he kept them there. "Renfrew."

"Like—" Jim gestured at the sculpture.

"The very same," the man said, "though the likeness is a poor one."

“Wait—what?” Jim glanced at Neil, who was watching the man intently. “I’m sorry: I thought you were saying—”

“I was.” The man withdrew his hands from his pockets. Blue flames licked the unburned skin of the left, while a slender emerald snake coiled around the right.

“Jesus!” Jim leapt back.

“Not quite.”

“What is this?”

Neil said, “We completed the course.”

“You did.” The man—Renfrew?—nodded. “Per the terms of a contract that is older than any of us, I am here to offer one of you my tutelage.”

“One of us,” Jim said. “What about the other?”

“The price of tuition,” Renfrew said. “A gesture of commitment.”

“Okay, that’s enough,” Jim said.

“Take me,” Neil said.

“What?”

“Very interesting,” Renfrew said.

“Neil, what are you saying?”

“The Alzheimer’s: that’s a sure thing?” Neil said.

“Sure enough,” Renfrew answered.

“And you can cure it?”

“I have been this age for a very long time,” Renfrew said. “You need never meet that old man in the mirror.”

“Are you kidding me?” Jim said. “Are you listening to yourself?”

“And there’s no other way?” Neil said.

“There are many other ways, if you know where and how to find them. This is my way.”

“I’m sorry,” Neil started, but Jim cut him off: “This is insane.”

“There was a link,” Neil said, “on the Blackguide site. I clicked on it, and it led to an account by a guy who had walked this course in the nineteen-

thirties with his brothers. With each new turn of the path, the three of them were at a different point in their lives: younger, then older, then much older. When they arrived back at the beginning, Renfrew was waiting for them."

"So all that was real?" Jim said.

"Real enough," Renfrew said.

"I thought if we could follow the course, then I could see how things would turn out—if we'd still be together; if we'd be happy; if Rose would still be around. I didn't expect—oh, Christ," Neil said. "Do you have any idea what it's like—no, you don't; how could you? Everything—you're aware that something is wrong, deeply wrong—you can feel it in everything around you—and you're sure you know what it is, what's the matter, but you can't remember it. And then you can remember, and you realize that the problem isn't with what's outside, it's with what's inside, and you know it's only a matter of time until you forget again and the whole process starts over." His eyes swam with tears.

"Neil, honey, it's okay," Jim said. "I'll be there for you."

"No," Neil said. "Don't you get it? I can't—I won't go through that. Now that I know—now that you know, how could you ask me to?"

"So instead you're going to… how does that story end, the one about the guy and his brothers?"

"The younger brother accepted Renfrew's offer. He and Renfrew disappeared, and when the older brother returned home, it was as if his brother had never existed. He was the only one who had any memory of him."

"Weren't there three of them? What happened to the other brother?"

"He vanished, too. No one remembered him, either."

Jim's mouth went dry. "The price of tuition."

"Speaking of which," Renfrew said, "we really need to move this along."

"You aren't going to do this," Jim said.

"What choice do I have?"

"You could choose me—choose us."

"Are you sure you don't want to make me an offer?" Renfrew said.

“Me?” Jim said. “I thought Neil—”

“Was here first, yes, but that’s more a recommendation than a rule. I’m curious to learn how your convictions fare when the situation is reversed.”

Neil’s mouth moved, but no sound issued from it.

“Well?” Renfrew said.

His fear seemed outside him, an acrid saturation pressing on him from all sides at once; nonetheless, Jim was able to say, “Fuck you.” The frown that darkened Renfrew’s face was a small pleasure. Jim looked at Neil, who was staring at the ground. “What I had with Rose—it was never as bad as you thought it was, and when I said it was over, it was.”

“For you, maybe.”

Renfrew swept his left arm up and down, blue fire trailing from his fingertips, tracing a seam in the air that opened into something like a door. He nodded at Neil, who crossed to and stepped through it without another word. Jim was as astonished by his lack of a parting remark as anything.

“Now,” Renfrew said, extending his right hand at Jim. The serpent wrapped around it raised its wedge-shaped head and regarded him lazily. The space behind the wizard darkened, full of an enormous shape. Jim thought, *How did the keep*—and realized that what had stepped closer was not the keep, or not anymore. It arched toward him, impossible mouth open to consume him, all of him, not only the flesh and bones it would grind between teeth like boulders, but his past, his present, his future, his very place in the world. He wished his fear would leave him, but he supposed it was better than the serrated edge of Neil’s betrayal waiting beneath it. At least he could keep his eyes open; at least he would not turn away from the emptiness, the silence, descending on him.

Bloom

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1

"Is that—do you see—"

Already Rick was braking, reaching for the hazards. Connie turned from the passenger-side window at whose streaky surface she had spent the last half-hour staring. Eyes on something ahead, her husband was easing the steering wheel left, toward the meridian. Following the line of his gaze, she saw, next to the guardrail about ten yards in front of them, a smallish red and white container. "What?" she said. "The cooler?"

"It's not a cooler," Rick said, bringing the Forrester to a stop. His voice was still sharp with the edge of their argument.

"What do you—" She understood before she could complete her question. "Jesus—is that a—"

"A cooler," Rick said, "albeit of a different sort."

The car was in neutral, the parking brake on, Rick's door open in the time it took her to arrive at her next sentence. "What's it doing here?"

"I have no idea," he said, and stepped out of the car. She leaned forward, watching him trot to the red and white plastic box with the red cross on it. It resembled nothing so much as the undersized cooler in which she and her roommates had stored their wine coolers during undergrad: the same peaked top that would slide back when you pressed the buttons on either side of it. Rick circled around it once clockwise, once counter-clockwise, and squatted on his haunches beside it. He was wearing denim shorts and the faded green Mickey Mouse T-shirt that he refused to allow Connie to claim for the rag drawer, even though it had been washed so many times it was practically translucent. (It was the outfit he chose whenever they went to visit his father.) He appeared to be reading something on the lid. He stood,

turned his head to squint up and down this stretch of the Thruway, empty in both directions. He blew out his breath and ran his hand through his hair—the way he did when he was pretending to debate a question he'd already decided—then bent, put his hands on the cooler, and picked it up. Apparently, it was lighter than he'd anticipated, because it practically leapt into the air. Almost race-walking, he carried the container toward the car.

Connie half expected him to hand it to her. Instead, he continued past her to the trunk. She tilted the rearview mirror to see him balancing the cooler against his hip and unlocking the trunk. When he thunked the lid down, his hands were empty.

The answer was so obvious she didn't want to ask the question; nonetheless, once Rick was back behind the wheel, drawing his seatbelt across, she said, "What exactly are you doing?"

Without looking at her, he said, "We can't just leave it there."

"If the cellphone were charged, we could call 911."

"Connie—"

"I'm just saying. You wanted to know why that kind of stuff was so important, well, here you are."

"You—" He glanced over his shoulder to make sure the highway was clear. As he accelerated onto it, he said, "You know what? You're right. If I'd charged the cellphone last night as you asked me to, we could dial 911 and have a State Trooper take this off our hands. That's absolutely true. Since the phone is dead, however, we need another plan. We're about forty, forty-five minutes from the house. I say we get home as quickly as we can and start calling around the local hospitals. Maybe this is for someone in one of them. In any event, I'm sure they'll know who to call to find out where this is supposed to go."

"Do they even do transplants in Wiltwyck?"

"I don't know. Maybe. I think Penrose might."

"We could stop at the next State Trooper barracks."

"The nearest one is our exit, up 209. We're as quick going to the house."

"You're sure there's something in there?"

“I didn’t look, but when I lifted it, I heard ice moving inside.”

“It didn’t look that heavy.”

“It wasn’t. But I don’t know how much a heart, or a kidney, would weigh. Not too much, I think.”

“I don’t know, I just—” She glanced over her shoulder. “I mean, Jesus, how does something like that wind up in the middle of the Thruway? How does that happen?”

Rick shrugged. “They don’t always hire the most professional guys to transport these things. Maybe someone’s tail flap was down, or they swerved to avoid a deer in the road and the cooler went tumbling out.”

“Surely not.”

“Well, if you knew the answer to the question—”

For a second their argument threatened to tighten its coils around them again. Connie said, “What about the lid? I thought you were reading something on it.”

“There’s a sticker on top that looks as if it had some kind of information, but the writing’s all blurred. Must have been that storm a little while ago.”

“So it’s been sitting here at least that long.”

“Seems likely. Maybe that was what happened: maybe the truck skidded and that caused the cooler to come loose.”

“Wouldn’t you stop and go back for something like that? Someone’s life could be on the line.”

“Could be the driver never noticed, was too busy trying to keep himself from crashing into the guardrail.”

The scenario sounded plausible enough—assuming, that was, you accepted Rick’s assertion about underqualified drivers employed to convey freshly harvested organs from donor to recipient. Which was, now that Connie thought about it, sufficiently venal and depressing to likely be the truth. “What if it’s supposed to be heading north, to Albany?”

“There’s probably still enough time, even if whoever it is has to drive back the way we came.”

“Maybe they could fly it wherever it needs to go. Doesn’t Penrose do that?”

“I think so.”

Already she was buying into Rick’s plan. Would it make that much difference to call the hospitals from their house instead of the police station? Equipped with a fully charged cellphone, they could have been rushing whatever was packed in the cooler’s ice to the surgical team that at this moment must be in the midst of preparations to receive it. Connie could picture herself and Rick striding into the Emergency Room at Wiltwyck, the cooler under Rick’s arm, a green-garbed surgeon waiting with gloves outstretched. With the cell inert, though, home might be their next best option. Based on her experiences with them at an embarrassing number of stops for speeding, the Wiltwyck Troopers would require more time than whoever was waiting for this cooler’s contents could spare for her and Rick to make clear to them the gravity of the situation.

That’s not true, she thought. You know that isn’t true. You’re just pissed because that guy wouldn’t agree to plead down to ten miles an hour over the speed limit. She was justifying Rick’s plan, shoring up his ambition to be part of the story—an important part, the random, passing stranger who turns out to be crucial to yanking someone at death’s very doorway back from that black rectangle. Because… because it was exciting to feel yourself caught up in a narrative like this, one that offered you the opportunity to be part of something bigger than yourself.

Rick had the speedometer to the other side of eighty-five. Connie reached her left hand across and squeezed his leg lightly. He did not remove his hands from the wheel.

2

Four hours later, they were staring at the cooler sitting on the kitchen table. Its surface was pebbled plastic; Connie wondered if that contributed in any way to keeping its contents chilled. The red cross stenciled on its lid was faded, a shade lighter than the bottom half of the cooler, and beginning to flake off. The symbol didn’t look like your typical red cross. This design was narrow at the join, the sides of each arm curving outwards on their way

to its end—the four of which were rounded, like the edges of a quartet of axes. Connie had seen this style of cross, or one close to it, before: Alexa, the first girl with whom she'd shared an apartment, and who had been more Catholic than the Pope, had counted a cross in this style among her religious jewelry. A Maltese cross? Cross of Malta? Something like that, although Connie remembered her old roommate's cross ornamented with additional designs—little pictures, she thought; of what, she couldn't recall. To be honest, this version of the cross seemed less a religious icon and more the image of something else—an abstract flower, perhaps, or an elaborate keyhole. For a moment, the four red lines opening out resembled nothing so much as the pupil of some oversized, alien eye, but that was ridiculous.

What it meant that the cooler resting on the blond wood of their kitchen table bore this emblem, she could not say. Did the Red Cross have subdivisions, local branches, and might this be one of their symbols? She'd never heard of such a thing, but she was a manager at Target; this was hardly her area of expertise.

Rick said, "Maybe it's a Mob thing."

"What?" Connie looked across the table at him, slouched back in his chair, arms folded over his chest.

"I said, maybe it's a Mob thing."

"What do you mean?"

He straightened. "Maybe it's part of someone who, you know, messed with the Mob. Or someone they had a contract on."

"Like what—a finger?"

"Finger, hand—proof that the job was done."

"Seriously?"

He shrugged. "It's a possibility."

"I don't know."

"You don't know what?"

"I don't know—I mean, the Mob? Transporting—what? Severed body parts in medical coolers? Wasn't that a movie?"

"Was it?"

“Yes—we saw it together. It was on TNT or TBS or something. Joe Pesci was in it. Remember: he’s a hit man and he’s got these heads in a duffle bag —”

“*Eight Heads in a Duffel Bag.”*

“That’s it!”

“So there was a movie. What does that prove?”

“It’s just—”

“Or maybe it’s some kind of black market thing, a kidney for sale to the highest bidder, no questions asked.”

“Isn’t that an urban legend?”

“Where do you think these things come from?”

“I—”

“Look—all I’m saying is, we’ve exhausted the legitimate avenues, so it makes sense to consider other possibilities.”

Connie took a breath. “Granted. But we don’t even know what’s inside the cooler—if there’s anything in it.”

“You’re the one who said we shouldn’t open it.”

“I know. It’s—if there’s something in it, then we need to be careful about not contaminating it.”

“Are you listening to yourself? We don’t know if there’s anything in the cooler, so we shouldn’t be too concerned about it, but we shouldn’t open it, in case there is something in there. What are we supposed to do?”

Before she could answer, Rick pushed himself up from his chair and stalked to the refrigerator, the bottles in whose door rattled as he yanked it open. Connie bit the remark ready to leap off her tongue. Instead, she stood and leaned over to have another look at the square sticker on the cooler’s lid. There were no identifying names on the label, no hospital or transport service logos, no barcode even, which, in the age of global computer tracking, struck her as stranger than the absence of a corporate ID. There were only four or five lines of smeared black ink, unintelligible except for one word that she and Rick had agreed read “Howard” and another that he guessed was “orchid” but of which Connie could identify no more than the

initial “o”. Now, as her gaze roamed over the ink blurred into swirls and loops, she had the impression that the words that had been written on this sticker hadn’t been English, the letters hadn’t been any she would have recognized. Some quality of the patterns into which the writing had been distorted suggested an alphabet utterly unfamiliar, which might smear into a configuration resembling “Howard” or “orchid” by the merest coincidence.

God, you’re worse than Rick. She resumed her seat as he returned from the fridge, an open bottle of Magic Hat in hand. Not that she wanted a drink, exactly, but his failure to ask her if she did sent Connie on her own mission to the fridge. They were out of hard cider, dammit. She had intended to stop at Hannaford for a quick shop on the way home, then the cooler had appeared and obscured all other concerns. They were almost out of milk, too, and butter. She selected a Magic Hat for herself and swung the door shut.

Rick had set his beer on the table and was standing with his back to her, bent forward slightly, his arms out, his hands on the cooler. “Rick?” Connie said. “What are you doing?”

“Is that a trick question?”

“Very funny,” she said, crossing the kitchen to him. He was staring at the cooler as if he could will its contents visible. He said, “We have to open it.”

“But if there’s something inside it—”

“I know, I know. I can’t see any other choice. We called Wiltwyck, and they didn’t know anything about it. Neither did Penrose or Albany Med or Westchester Med. The transport services they gave us the numbers for weren’t missing any shipments—the one said they aren’t even using coolers like this anymore. The cops were useless. Hell, that guy at the sheriff’s thought it was probably just someone’s cooler. Maybe there’ll be some kind of information inside that’ll tell us where this is supposed to go.”

“What if it’s a Mob thing?”

“Do you really believe that?”

“No, but I could be wrong, in which case, what would we do?”

“Get rid of it as quickly as possible. Burn it. I don’t think there’s any way it could be traced to us.”

To her surprise, Connie said, “All right. Go ahead.”

Rick didn’t ask if she were sure. He pressed in the catches on the lid and slid it back. As Connie inclined toward it, he drew the cooler toward them. It scraped against the table; its contents shifted with a sound like gravel rasping. Connie had been anticipating a strong odor washing out of the cooler’s interior, raw meat full of blood; instead, there was the faintest blue hint of air long chilled and another, even fainter trace of iodine. Rick’s arm was blocking her view; she nudged him. “What is it?”

“I don’t know.”

“Let me see.”

He shifted to the right. The cooler was full of ice, chips of it heaped in shining piles around, around—

She registered the color first, the dark purple of a ripe eggplant, shot through with veins of lighter purple—blue, she thought, some shade of blue. It was maybe as wide as a small dinner plate, thicker at the center than at its scalloped circumference. At five—no, six spots around its margin, the surface puckered, the color around each spot shading into a rich rose. The texture of the thing was striated, almost coarse.

“What the fuck?”

“I know—right?”

“Rick—what is this?”

“A placenta?”

“That is not a placenta.”

“As if you’ve seen one.”

“As a matter of fact, I have. There was a show on Lifetime—I can’t remember what it was called, but it was about women giving birth, in living color, no detail spared. I saw plenty of placentas, and trust me, that is not a placenta.”

“Okay, it’s not a placenta. So what is it?”

“I—is it even human?”

“You’re saying what? that it’s an animal?”

“I don’t know—some kind of jellyfish?”

“Looks too solid, doesn’t it? Besides, wouldn’t you store a jellyfish in water?”

“I guess.”

Rick started to reach into the cooler. Connie grabbed his wrist. “Jesus! What are you doing?”

“I thought I’d take it out so we could have a better look at it.” He tugged his hand free.

“You don’t know what it is.”

“I’m pretty sure it isn’t someone’s kidney.”

“Granted, but you can’t just—it could be dangerous, toxic.”

“Really.”

“There are animals whose skin is poisonous. Haven’t you heard of Poison Dart Frogs?”

“Oh.” He lowered his hand. “Fair enough.” He stepped away from the cooler. “Sweetie—what is this?”

“Well, I’m pretty sure we can say what it isn’t. I doubt there’s anyone whose life depends on receiving this, and I’m pretty sure it wasn’t attached to any Mob informer. Nor was it feeding a fetus nutrients for nine months. That leaves us with—I don’t have the faintest idea. Some kind of animal.”

“I don’t know.”

Connie shrugged. “The world’s a big place. There are all kinds of crazy things living at the bottom of the ocean. Or it could be from someplace else—deep underground. Maybe it’s a new discovery that was being transported to a museum.”

Rick grunted. “Okay. Let’s assume this was on its way to an eager research scientist. What’s our next move?”

“Another round of phone calls, I guess.”

“You want to start on that, and I’ll get dinner going?”

She wasn’t hungry, but she said, “Sure.”

Rick reached for the cooler. “Relax,” he said as she tensed, ready to seize his arms. Steadying the cooler with his left hand, he closed it with the right.

The lid snicked shut.

3

No surprise: she dreamed about the thing in the cooler. She was in Rick's father's room at the nursing home (even asleep, she was unable to think of him as "Gary" or "Mr. Wilson," let alone "Dad"). Rick's father was in the green vinyl recliner by the window, his face tilted up to the sunlight pouring over him in a way that reminded Connie of a large plant feeding on light. The green Jets sweatsuit he was wearing underscored the resemblance. His eyes were closed, his lips moving in the constant murmur that had marked the Alzheimer's overwhelming the last of his personality. In the flood of brightness, he looked younger than fifty-eight, as if he might be Rick's young uncle, and not the father not old enough for the disease that had consumed him with the relentless patience of a python easing itself around its prey.

Connie was standing with her back to the room's hefty dresser, the top of which was heaped with orchids, their petals eggplant and rose. The air was full of the briny smell of seaweed baking on the beach, which she knew was the flowers' scent.

Although she hadn't noticed him enter the room, Rick was kneeling in front of his father, his hands held up and out as if offering the man a gift. His palms cupped the thing from the cooler. Its edges overflowed his hands. In the dense sunlight, the thing was even darker, more rather than less visible. If the scene in front of her were a photograph, the thing was a dab of black paint rising off its surface.

"Here," Rick said to his father. "I brought it for you." When his father did not respond, Rick said, "Dad."

The man opened his eyes and tilted his head in his son's direction. Connie didn't think he saw what Rick was offering him. He croaked, "Bloom."

"Beautiful," Rick said.

His father's eyes narrowed, and his face swung toward Connie. He was weeping, tears coursing down his cheeks like lines of fire in the sunlight. "Bloom," he said.

Almost before she knew she was awake, she was sitting up in bed. Although she was certain it must be far into the night, one of those hours you only saw when the phone rang to announce some family tragedy, the digital clock insisted it was two minutes after midnight. She had been asleep for an hour. She turned to Rick and found his side of the bed empty.

There was no reason for her heart to start pounding. Rick stayed up late all the time, watching *Nightline* or Charlie Rose. For the seven years Connie had known him, he had been a light sleeper, prone to insomnia, a tendency that had worsened with his father's unexpected and sudden decline. She had sought him out enough times in the beginning of their relationship to be sure that there was no cause for her to leave the bed. She would find him on the couch, bathed in the TV's glow, a bag of microwave popcorn open on his lap. So prepared was she for him to be there that, when she reached the bottom of the stairs and discovered the living room dark, something like panic straightened her spine. "Rick?" she said. "Honey?"

Of course he was in the kitchen. She glimpsed him out of the corner of her eye the same instant he said, "I'm in here." By the streetlight filtering through the window she saw him seated at the kitchen table, wearing a white t-shirt and boxers, his arms on the table, his hands on the keyboard of his father's laptop, which was open and on. The cooler, which he had pushed back to make room for the computer, appeared to be closed. (She wasn't sure why that detail made her heart slow.) She walked down the hallway to him, saying, "Couldn't sleep, huh?"

"Nah." His eyes did not leave the computer screen.

"You're like this every time we visit your dad."

"Am I? I guess so."

She rubbed his back. "You're doing all you can for him. It's a good place."

"Yeah."

On the laptop's screen, a reddish sphere hung against a backdrop of stars. Connie recognized the painting from the NASA website, and the next picture Rick brought up, of a rough plane spread out under a starry sky, at the center of which a cluster of cartoonishly fat arrows identified a handful of the dots of light as the sun and planets of the solar system. A third image

showed eight green circles arranged concentrically around a bright point, all within one end of an enormous red ellipse.

The screen after that was a photo of a massive stone monument, a rectangular block stood on its short end, another block laid across its top to form a T-shape. The front of the tall stone was carved with a thick line that descended from high on the right to almost the bottom of the left, where it curved back right again; in the curve, a representation of a four-legged animal Connie could not identify crouched. The image that followed was another painting, this one of a trio of circular structures set in the lee of a broad hill, the diameter of each defined by a thick wall, the interior stood with T-shaped monoliths like the one on the previous screen.

Rick sped through the next dozen screens, long rows of equations more complex than any Connie had encountered in her college math class, half of each line composed of symbols she thought were Greek but wasn't sure. When he came to what appeared to be a list of questions, Rick stopped. Connie could read the first line: 12,000-year orbit coincides with construction of Gobekli Tepe: built in advance of, or in response to, seeding?

Oh God, Connie thought. She said, "You want to come to bed?"

"I will. You go ahead."

"I don't want you sitting up half the night feeling guilty."

He paused, then said, "It isn't guilt."

"Oh? What is it?"

He shook his head. "I had a dream."

Her mouth went dry. "Oh?"

He nodded. "I was sitting here with my dad. We were both wearing tuxedoes, and the table had been set for some kind of elaborate meal: white linen tablecloth, candelabra, china plates, the works. It was early in the morning—at least, I think it was, because the windows were pouring light into the room. The plates, the cutlery, the glasses—everything was shining, it was so bright. For a long time, it felt like, we sat there—here—and then I noticed Dad was holding his fork and knife and was using them to cut something on his plate. It was this," he nodded at the cooler, "this thing. He

was having a rough time. He couldn’t grip the cutlery right; it was as if he’d forgotten how to hold them. His knife kept slipping, scraping on the plate. The thing was tough; he really had to saw at it. It was making this noise, this high-pitched sound that was kind of like a violin. It was bleeding, or leaking, black syrupy stuff that was all over the plate, the knife, splattering the tablecloth, Dad’s shirt. Finally he got a piece of the thing loose and raised it to his mouth. Only, his lips were still trembling, you know, doing that silent mumble, and he couldn’t maneuver the fork past them. The piece flopped on the table. He frowned, speared it with his fork again, and made another try. No luck. The third time, the piece hit the edge of the table and bounced off. That was it. He dropped the cutlery, grabbed the thing on his plate with both hands, and brought it up. His face was so eager. He licked his lips and took a huge bite. He had to clamp down hard, pull the rest away. There was a ripping noise. The thing’s blood was all over his lips, his teeth, his tongue; his mouth looked like a black hole.”

Connie waited for him to continue; when he didn’t, she said, “And?”

“That was it. I woke up and came down here. There was nothing on TV, so I thought I’d get out Dad’s laptop and… It’s like a connection to him, to how he used to be, you know? I mean, I know he was already pretty bad when he was working on this stuff, but at least he was there.”

“Huh.” Connie considered relating her own dream, decided instead to ask, “What do you think your dream means?”

“I don’t know. I dream about my Dad a lot, but this…”

“Do you—”

“What if it’s from another planet?”

“What?”

“Maybe the dream’s a message.”

“I don’t—”

“That would explain why there’s no record of it, anywhere, why none of the museums knows anything about it.”

“That doesn’t make any sense,” Connie said. “If this thing were some kind of alien, you’d expect it’d be all over the news.”

“Maybe it’s dangerous—or they aren’t sure if it’s dangerous.”

“So they pack it into a cooler?”

“They’re trying to fly under the radar.”

“I don’t know—that’s so low, it’s underground.”

“Or—what if a couple of guys found it—somewhere, they were out hunting or fishing or something—and they decided to take it with them in the cooler they’d brought for their beers?”

“Then why the red cross on the cooler? What about the sticker?”

“Coincidence—they just happened to take that cooler.”

“I could—Look, even if that is the case, if a couple of hunters came upon this thing, I don’t know, fresh from its meteorite, and emptied out their oddly decorated cooler so they could be famous as the first guys to encounter E.T., how does that help us know what to do?”

“We could call NASA.”

“Who what? Would send out the Men in Black?”

“I’m serious!” Rick almost shouted. “This is serious! Jesus! We could be—we have—why can’t you take this seriously?” He turned to glare at her as he spoke.

“Rick—”

“Don’t ‘Rick’ me.”

Connie inhaled. “Honey—it’s late. We’re tired. Let’s not do this, okay? Not now. I’m sorry if I’m not taking this seriously. It’s been a long day. Whatever it is, the thing in the cooler’ll keep until we get some sleep. If you want, we can call NASA first thing in the morning. Really—I swear.”

“I—” She readied herself for the next phase of his outburst, then, “You’re right,” Rick said. “You’re right. It has been a long day, hasn’t it?”

“Very. I can’t believe you aren’t exhausted.”

“I am—believe me, I’m dead on my feet. It’s just, this thing—”

“I understand—honest, I do. Why don’t you come up to bed? Maybe once you lie down—”

“All right. You go up. I just need a minute more.”

“For what?” she wanted to ask but didn’t, opting instead to drape her arms over his shoulders and press her cheek against his neck. “Love you,” she said into his skin.

“Love you, too.”

Her heart, settled after its earlier gallop, broke into a trot again as she padded down the hall to the stairs. The sight of Rick, once more staring at the computer screen, did nothing to calm it, nor did her lowering herself onto the bed, drawing the covers up. If anything, the thoroughbred under her ribs charged faster. She gazed at the bedroom ceiling, feeling the mattress resound with her pulse. Was she having a panic attack? *Don’t think about it,* she told herself. *Concentrate on something else.*

Rick. What else was there besides him at the table, his fingers resting on the keyboard’s sides, sifting through his father’s last, bizarre project? Not the most reassuring behavior; although it was true: each monthly pilgrimage to his father left him unsettled for the rest of that day, sometimes the next. No matter how many times she told him that his dad was in the best place, that the home provided him a quality of care they couldn’t have (not to mention, his father’s insurance covered it in full), and no matter how many times Rick answered, “You’re right; you’re absolutely right,” she knew that he didn’t accept her reasoning, her reassurance. In the past, thinking that anger might help him to articulate his obvious guilt, she had tried to pick a fight with him, stir him to argument, but he had headed in the opposite direction, descended into himself for the remainder of the weekend. She had suggested they visit his dad more often, offered to rearrange her work schedule so that they could go up twice a month, even three times. What good was being store manager, she’d said, if you couldn’t use it to your advantage? Albany wasn’t that far, and there were supposed to be good restaurants there; they could make a day of it, spend time with his father and have some time for themselves, too.

No, no, Rick had said. It wasn’t fair for her to have to rework the schedule (arriving at which she’d compared to the circus act where the clown spins the plates on the ends of all the poles he’s holding while balancing his unicycle on the high wire). It wasn’t as if his dad would know the difference anyway.

He might not, Connie had said, but you will.

It was no good, though; Rick's mind had been made up before their conversation had started. He had never admitted it, but Connie was sure he was still traumatized by his father's last months of—you couldn't call it lucidity exactly, since what he would call to yell at Rick about was pretty insane. Gary Wilson had been an astronomer, his most recent work an intensive study of the dwarf planets discovered beyond Neptune in the first decade of the 2000s: Eris, Sedna, and Orcus were the names she remembered. From what she understood, his research on the surface conditions on these bodies was cutting-edge stuff; he had been involved in the planning for a probe to explore some of them. Plenty of times she and Rick had arrived at his apartment to take him to dinner, only to find him seated at his desk, staring at his computer monitor, at a painting of one or the other of the dwarf planets. At those moments he had seemed a million miles away, further, as far as one of the spheres he studied. Hindsight's clarity made it obvious he was experiencing the early effects of Alzheimer's, but the spells had always broken the moment Rick shook him and said, "Dad, it's us," and it had been easier to accept her father-in-law's assurance that he had merely been daydreaming.

Not until his behavior became more erratic did it dawn on them that Rick's father might not be well. His attention had been focused on one dwarf planet, Sedna, for months. Connie had sat beside him at the Plaza diner as he flipped over his mat and drew an asterisk in the center of it, which he surrounded with a swirl of concentric circles, all at one end of a great oval. "This is Sedna's orbit," he had said, jabbing his pen at the oval. "Twelve thousand years, give or take a few hundred. Over the next couple of centuries it will be as close to us as it's been during the whole of recorded history. The last time it was this near, well…"

"What?" Rick had said.

"You'll see," his father had declared.

They hadn't, though, not directly. One of Rick's father's friends at the State University had phoned after a presentation during which the extent of Gary Wilson's breakdown had become manifest. Connie had heard the lecture herself, in person, on the phone, and in a long, rambling voicemail. She

considered herself reasonably well educated in a hold-your-own-at-Trivial-Pursuit kind of way, but Rick's father's discussion strained her comprehension. Almost thirteen thousand years ago, a comet had burst over the Great Lakes—yes, that was a controversial claim, but how else to explain the high levels of iridium, the nano-diamonds? The glaciers were already in retreat, you see; it was the right time, if you could measure time in centuries—millennia. This was when the Clovis disappeared—wiped out, or assimilated in some way, it was hard to say. You wouldn't think a stone point much of a threat, but you'd be surprised. The drawings at Lascaux—well, never mind them. It's what happens at Gobekli Tepe that's important. Those curves on the stones—has anyone thought of mapping them onto Sedna's orbit? The results—as for the shape of the monuments, those giant T's, why, they're perches, for the messengers.

And so on. The thing was, while Rick's father was propounding this lunatic hodgepodge of invention, he sounded as reasonable, as kindly, as he ever had. Perhaps that was because she hadn't challenged him in the way that Rick did, tell him that his ideas were crazy, he was flushing his career down the toilet. Confronted by his son's strenuous disbelief, Gary flushed with anger, was overtaken by storms of rage more intense than any she had witnessed in the seven years she had known him. He would stalk from their house and demand that Connie drive him home, then, once home, he would call and harangue Rick for another hour, sometimes two, until Rick reached his boiling point and hung up on him.

The end, when it came, had done so quickly: she had been amazed at the speed with which Rick's father had been convinced to accept early retirement and a place in an assisted living facility. There had been a brief period of days, not even a full week, during which he had returned to something like his old self. He had signed all the papers necessary to effect his departure from the college and his relocation to Morrison Hills. He had spoken to Rick and Connie calmly, with barely a mention of Sedna's impending return. Two days after he settled into his new, undersized room, Gary had suffered a catastrophic event somewhere in his brain that the doctors refused to call a stroke, saying the MRI results were all wrong for that. (Frankly, they seemed mystified by what had happened to him during the night.) Whatever its name, the occurrence had left him a few steps up

from catatonic, intermittently responsive and usually in ways that made no sense. There was talk of further study, of sub-specialists being brought in, possible trips to hospitals in other states, but nothing, as yet, had come to pass. Connie doubted any of it would. There were more than enough residents of the facility who could and did vocalize their complaints, and less than enough staff to spare on a man whose tongue was so much dead weight.

Harrowing as Rick's father's decline had been, she supposed she should be grateful that it had not stretched out longer than it had. From talking with staff at Morrison, she knew it could take years for a parent's worsened condition to convince them/their family that something had to be done. At the same time, though, Rick had been ambivalent about his father entering assisted living. There was enough room in the house for him: he could have stayed in the downstairs bedroom and had his own bathroom. But neither of them was available for—or, to be honest, up for—the task of caring for him. Rick's consent to his father's move had been conditional; he had insisted and Connie had agreed that they would re-evaluate the situation in six months. Their contract had been rendered null and void by Gary's collapse, which had left him in need of a level of care far beyond that for which either of them was equipped. However irrational the sentiment might be, Connie knew that Rick took his father's crash as a rebuke from the universe for having agreed to send him away in the first place.

Connie didn't realize she had crossed over into sleep again until she noticed that the bedroom's ceiling and walls had vanished, replaced by a night sky brimming with stars. Her bed was sitting on a vast plane, dimly lit by the stars' collective radiance. Its dark red expanse was stippled and ridged, riven by channels; she had the impression of dense mud. That and cold: although she could not feel it on her skin, she sensed that wherever this was was so cold it should have frozen her in place, her blood crystallized, her organs chunks of ice.

To her left, a figure was progressing slowly across the plane. It was difficult to be sure, but it looked like a man, dressed in black. Every few steps, he would pause and study the ground in front of him, occasionally crouching and poking it with one hand. Connie watched him for what might have been a long time. Her bed, she noticed, was strewn with orchids, their

petals eggplant and rose. At last she drew back the blanket, lowered herself onto the red mud, and set out toward him.

She had expected the mud to be ice-brittle, but while it was firm under her feet, it was also the slightest bit spongy. She wasn't sure how this could be. A glance over her shoulder showed the bed and its cargo of flowers unmoved. While she was still far away from him, she saw that the man ahead of her was wearing a tuxedo, and that he was Rick's father. She was not surprised by either of these facts.

In contrast to her previous dream of him, Gary Wilson stood tall, alert. He was following a series of depressions in the plane's surface, each a concave dip of about a foot, maybe six feet from the one behind it. At the bottom of the depressions, something dark shone through the red mud. When he bent to prod one, he licked his finger clean afterwards. Connie could feel his awareness of her long before she drew near, but he waited until she was standing beside him to say, "Well?"

"Where is this?"

"Oh, come now," he said, disappointment bending his voice. "You know the answer to that already."

She did. "Sedna."

He nodded. "The nursery."

"For those?" She pointed at the depression before him.

"Of course."

"What are they?"

"Embryos." The surface of his cheek shifted.

"I don't understand."

"Over here." He turned to his left and crossed to another row of depressions. Beside the closest was a small, red and white container—a cooler, its top slid open. To either side, the depressions were attended by thermoses, lunchboxes, larger coolers, even a small refrigerator. Rick's father knelt at a dip and reached his hand down into the mud, working his fingers in a circle around whatever lay half-buried in it. Once it was freed, he raised it, using his free hand to brush the worst of the mud from it. "This," he said, holding out to Connie a copy of the thing she and Rick had

found on the Thruway. Its surface was darker than the spaces between the stars overhead.

"That's an embryo?" she said.

"Closest word." Bending to the open cooler, he gently deposited the thing inside it. His hands free, he clicked the cooler's lid shut. "Someone will be by for this shortly," he said, raising his fingers to his tongue.

"I don't," Connie started, and there was an explosion of wings, or what might have been wings, a fury of black flapping. She put up her hands to defend herself, and the wings were gone, the cooler with them. "What… ?"

"You have to prepare the ground, first," Rick's father said, "fertilize it, you could say. A little more time would have been nice, but Tunguska was long enough ago. To tell the truth, if we'd had to proceed earlier, it wouldn't have mattered." He stepped to the next hole and its attendant thermos and repeated his excavation. As he was jiggling the thing into the thermos, Connie said, "But—why?"

"Oh, that's…" Rick's father gestured at the thermos's side, where the strange cross with the slender join and rounded arms was stenciled. "You know."

"No, I don't."

Gary Wilson shrugged. His face slid with the movement, up, then down, the flesh riding on the bone. The hairs on Connie's neck, her arms, stood rigid. She did not want to accompany him as he turned left again and headed for a deep slice in the mud, but she could not think what else to do. Behind her there was a chaos of flapping, and silence.

The fissure in the mud ran in both directions as far as she could see. It was probably narrow enough for her to jump across. She was less sure of its depth, rendered uncertain by dimness. At or near the bottom something rose, not high enough for her to distinguish it, but sufficiently near for her to register a great mass. "Too cold out here," Rick's father said. "Makes them sluggish. Inhibits their"—he waved his hands—"development. Confines it."

There were more of whatever-it-was down there. Some quality of their movement made Connie grateful she couldn't see any more of them.

“Funny,” Rick’s father said. “They need this place for infancy, your place for maturity. Never known another breed with such extreme requirements.”

“What are they?”

“I guess you would call them… gods? Is that right? *Orchidaceae deus* ? They bloom.”

“What?”

“Bloom.”

4

There was a small deck at the back of the house, little more than a half-dozen planks of unfinished wood raised on as many thick posts, bordered by an unsteady railing, at the top of a flight of uneven stairs. A door led from the deck into the house’s laundry room, whose location on the second floor had impressed Connie as one of the reasons to rent the place two years ago, when her promotion to manager had allowed sufficient money to leave their basement apartment and its buffet of molds behind. Mornings she didn’t have to open the store, and Rick hadn’t worked too late the night before, they would carry their mugs of coffee out here. She liked to stand straight, her mug cradled in her hands, while Rick preferred to take his chances leaning on the rail. Sometimes they spoke, but mostly they were quiet, listening to the birds performing their various morning songs, watching the squirrels chase one another across the high branches of the trees whose roots knitted together the small rise behind the house.

A freak early frost had whited the deck and stairs. Once the sun was streaming through the trunks of the oaks and maples stationed on the rise, the frost would steam off, but at the moment dawn was a red hint amidst the dark trees. Red sky at morning, Connie thought.

She was seated at the top of the deck stairs, wrapped in the green and white knitted blanket she’d grabbed when she’d left the laundry room hours ago. The bottle of Stolichnaya cradled in her arms was almost empty, despite which, she felt as sober as she ever had. More than sober—her senses were operating past peak capacity. The grooves in the bark of the oaks on the rise were deep gullies flanked by vertical ridges. The air eddying over her skin

was dense with moisture. The odor of the soil in which the trees clutched their roots was the brittle-paper smell of dead leaves crumbling mixed with the damp thickness of dirt. It was as if she were under a brilliant white light, one that allowed her no refuge, but that also permitted her to view her surroundings with unprecedented clarity.

She had emerged from her dream of Rick's father to silence, to a stillness so profound the sound of her breathing thundered in her ears. Rick's side of the bed was still cold. Except for a second strange dream on the same night, there had been no reason for Connie to do anything other than return to sleep. Her dream, however, had seemed sufficient cause for her to rouse herself and (once more) set out downstairs in search of Rick. In the quiet that had draped the house, the creaks of the stairs under her feet had been horror-movie loud.

She had not been sure what she would find downstairs, and had walked past the front parlor before her brain caught up to what it had noticed from the corner of her eye and sent her several steps back. The small room they called the front parlor, whose bay window overlooked the front porch, had been dark. Not just nighttime dark (which, with the streetlight outside, wasn't really that dark), but complete and utter blackness. This hadn't been the lack of light so much as the overwhelming presence of its opposite, a dense inkiness that had filled the room like water in a tank. Connie had reached out her hand to touch it, only to stop with her fingers a hairsbreadth away from it, when the prospect of touching it had struck her as a less than good idea. Lowering her hand, she had retreated along the hall to the dining room.

Before the dining room, though, she had paused at the basement door, open wide and allowing a thick, briny stench up from its depths. The smell of seaweed and assorted sea-life baking on the beach, the odor had been oddly familiar, despite her inability to place it. She had reached around the doorway for the light switch, flipped it on, and poked her head through the doorway. Around the foot of the stairs, she had seen something she could not immediately identify. There had been no way she was venturing all the way into the basement; already, the night had taken too strange a turn for her to want to put herself into so ominous, if clichéd, a location. But she

had been curious enough to descend the first couple of stairs and crouch to look through the railings.

When she had, Connie had seen a profusion of flowers, orchids, their petals eggplant and rose. They had covered the concrete floor so completely she could not see it. A few feet closer to them, the tidal smell was stronger, almost a taste. The orchids were motionless, yet she had had the impression that she had caught them on the verge of movement. She had wanted to think, *I'm dreaming; this is part of that last dream,* but the reek of salt and rot had been too real. She had stood and backed upstairs.

Mercifully, the dining room had been unchanged, its table, chairs, and china cabinet highlighted by the streetlight's orange glow. Unchanged, that was, except for the absence of the cooler from the table, and why had she been so certain that, wherever the container was, its lid was open, its contents gone? Rick's father's laptop had remained where her husband had set it up, its screen dark. Connie had pressed the power button, and the rectangle had brightened with the image of one of the T-shaped stone monuments, its transverse section carved with what appeared to be three birds processing down from upper left to lower right, their path taking them over the prone form of what might have been a man—though if it was, the head was missing. The upright block was carved with a boar, its tusks disproportionately large.

Thinking Rick might have decided to sleep in the guest room, she had crossed to the doorway to the long room along the back of the house, the large space for which they had yet to arrive at a use. To the right the room had wavered, as if she had been looking at it through running water. One moment it had bulged toward her; the next, it had telescoped away. In the midst of that uncertainty, she had seen… she couldn't say what. It was as if that part of the house had been a screen against which something enormous had been pushing and pulling, its form visible only through the distortions it caused in the screen. The sight had hurt her eyes, her brain, to behold; she had been not so much frightened as sickened, nauseated. No doubt she should have fled the house, taken the car keys from the hook at the front door and driven as far from here as the gas in the tank would take her.

Rick, though: she couldn't leave him here with all this. Dropping her gaze to her feet, she had stepped into the back room, flattening herself against the

wall to her left. A glance had showed nothing between her and the door to the guest room, and she had slid along the wall to it as quickly as her legs would carry her. A heavy lump of dread, for Rick, alone down here as whatever this was had happened, had weighed deep below her stomach. At the threshold to the guest room she had tried to speak, found her voice caught in her throat. She had coughed, said, “Rick? Honey?” the words striking the silence in the air like a mallet clanging off a gong; she had flinched at their loudness.

Connie had not been expecting Rick to step out of the guest room as if he had been waiting there for her. With a shriek, she had leapt back. He had raised his hands, no doubt to reassure her, but even in the dim light she could see they were discolored, streaked with what looked like tar, as was his mouth, his jaw. He had stepped toward her, and Connie had retreated another step. “Honey,” he had said, but the endearment had sounded wrong, warped, as if his tongue had forgotten how to shape his words.

“Rick,” she had said, “what—what happened?”

His lips had peeled back, but whatever he had wanted to say, it would not come out.

“The house—you’re—”

“It’s… okay. He showed me… Dad.”

“Your father? What did he show you?”

Rick had not lowered his hands; he gestured with them to his mouth.

“Oh, Christ. You—you didn’t.”

Yes he did, Rick had nodded.

“Are you insane? Do you have any idea what—you don’t know what that thing was! You probably poisoned yourself…”

“Fine,” Rick had said. “I’m… fine. Better. More.”

“What?”

“Dad showed me.”

Whatever the cooler’s content, she had been afraid the effects of consuming it were already in full swing, the damage already done. Yet despite the compromise in his speech, Rick’s eyes had burned with

intelligence. Sweeping his hands around him, he had said, “All… the same. Part of—” He had uttered a guttural sound she could not decipher, but that had hurt her ears to hear.

“Rick,” she had said, “we have to leave—we have to get you to a doctor. Come on.” She had started toward the doorway to the dining room, wondering whether Wiltwyck would be equipped for whatever toxin he had ingested. The other stuff, the darkness, the orchids, the corner, could wait until Rick had been seen by a doctor.

“No.” The force of his refusal had halted Connie where she was. “See.”

“What—” She had turned to him, and seen… she could not say what. Hours later, her nerves calmed if not soothed by the vodka that had washed down her throat, she could not make sense of the sight that had greeted her. When she tried to replay it, she saw Rick, then saw his face, his chest, burst open, pushed aside by the orchids thrusting their eggplant and rose petals out of him. The orchids, Rick, wavered, as if she were looking at them through a waterfall, and then erupted into a cloud of darkness that coalesced into Rick’s outline. Connie had the sense that that was only an approximation of what she actually had witnessed, and not an especially accurate one at that. As well say she had seen all four things simultaneously, like a photograph overexposed multiple times, or that she had seen the cross from the top of the cooler, hanging in the air.

She had responded with a headlong flight that had carried her upstairs to the laundry room. Of course, it had been a stupid destination, one she was not sure why she had chosen, except perhaps that the side and front doors had lain too close to one of the zones of weirdness that had overtaken the house. The bottle of Stolichnaya had been waiting next to the door to the deck, no doubt a refugee from their most recent party. She could not think of a reason not to open it and gulp a fiery mouthful of its contents; although she couldn’t think of much of anything. She had been, call it aware of the quiet, the silence pervading the house, which had settled against her skin and become intolerable, until she had grabbed a blanket from the cupboard and let herself out onto the deck. There, she had wrapped herself in the blanket and seated herself at the top of the deck stairs.

Tempting to say she had been in shock, but shock wasn't close: shock was a small town she had left in the rearview mirror a thousand miles ago. This was the big city, metropolis of a sensation like awe or ecstasy, a wrenching of the self that rendered such questions as how she was going to help Rick, how they were going to escape from this, immaterial. From where she was sitting, she could look down on their Subaru, parked maybe fifteen feet from the foot of the stairs. There was an emergency key under an overturned flowerpot in the garage. These facts were neighborhoods separated by hundreds of blocks, connected by a route too byzantine for her understanding to take. She had stayed where she was as the constellations wheeled above her, the sky lightened from blue-bordering-on-black to dark blue. Her breath plumed from her lips; she pulled the blanket tighter and nursed the vodka as, through a process too subtle for her to observe, frost spread over the deck, the stairs.

When the eastern sky was a blue so pale it was almost white, she had noticed a figure standing at the bottom of the stairs. For a moment she had mistaken it for Rick, had half stood at the prospect, and then she had recognized Rick's father. He had been dressed in the same tuxedo he'd worn in her second dream of him, the knees of his trousers and the cuffs of his shirt and jacket crusted with red mud. His presence prompted her to speech. "You," she had said, resuming her seat. "Are you Rick's dad, or what?"

"Yes."

"Great. Can you tell me what's happened to my husband?"

"He's taken the seed into himself."

"The thing from the cooler."

"He blooms."

"I don't—" She'd shaken her head. "Why… why? Why him? Why this?"

Rick's father had shrugged, and she had done her best not to notice if his face had shifted with the movement.

She had sighed. "What now?"

"He will want a consort."

"He what?"

“His consort.”

She would not have judged herself capable of the laughter that had burst from her. “You have got to be fucking kidding me.”

“The process is under way.”

“I don’t think so.”

“Look at your bottle.”

“This?” She had held up the vodka. “It’s alcohol.”

“Yes. He thought that might help.”

“What do you—” Something, some glint of streetlight refracting on the bottle’s glass, had caused her to bring it to her eyes, tilting it so that the liquor sloshed up one side. In the orange light shimmering in it, Connie had seen tiny black flakes floating, dozens, hundreds of them. “Oh, no. No way. No.”

“It will take longer this way, but he thought you would need the time.”

“He? You mean Rick? Rick did this?”

“To bring you to him, to what he is.”

“Bring me—”

“To bloom.”

“This is—no. No.” She had wanted to hurl the bottle at Rick’s father, but had been unable to release her grip on it. “Not Rick. No.”

He had not argued the point; instead, before the last denial had left her mouth, the space where he’d stood had been empty.

That had been… not that long ago, she thought. Time enough for the horizon to flush, for her to feel herself departing the city of awe to which the night’s sights had brought her for somewhere else, a great gray ocean swelling with storm. She had squinted at the bottle of Stolichnaya, at the black dots drifting in what remained of its contents. Rick had done this? So she could be his consort? Given what she’d witnessed this night, it seemed silly to declare one detail of it more outrageous than the rest, but this… She could understand, well, imagine how an appearance by his father might have convinced her husband that eating the thing in the cooler was a good

idea. But to leap from that to thinking that he needed to bring Connie along for the ride, that was something else.

The thing was, it was entirely typical of the way Rick acted, had acted, the length of their relationship. He plunged into decisions like a bungee-jumper abandoning the trestle of a bridge, confident that the cord to which he'd tethered himself, i.e. her, would pull him back from the rocks jagged below. He dropped out of grad school even though it meant he would lose the deferment for the sixty thousand dollars in student loans he had no job to help him repay. He registered for expensive training courses for professions in which he lost interest halfway through the class. He overdrew their joint account for take-out dinners when there was a refrigerator's worth of food waiting at home. And now, the same tendencies that had led to them having so much difficulty securing a mortgage—that had left the fucking cellphone's battery depleted—had caused him to… she wasn't even sure she knew the word for it.

The sky between the trees on the rise was filling with color, pale rose deepening to rich crimson, the trunks and branches against it an extravagant calligraphy she could not read. The light ruddied her skin, shone redly on the bottle, glowed hellishly on the frosted steps, deck. She stared through the trees at it, let it saturate her vision.

The photons cascaded against her leaves, stirring them to life.

(What?)

She convoluted, moving at right angles to herself, the sunlight fracturing.

(Oh)

Blackness.

(God.)

She lurched to her feet.

Roots tingled, blackness, unfolding, frost underfoot. Connie gripped the liquor bottle by the neck and swung it against the porch railing. Smashing it took three tries. The last of the vodka splashed onto the deck planks. She pictured hundreds of tiny black—what had Rick's father called them?—embryos shrieking, realized she was seeing them, hearing them.

Blackness her stalk in-turning glass on skin. Connie inspected the bottle's jagged top. As improvised weapons went, she supposed it wasn't bad, but she had the feeling she was bringing a rock to a nuclear war.

The dawn air was full of the sound of flapping, of leathery wings snapping. She could almost see the things that were swirling around the house, could feel the spaces they were twisting. She released the blanket, let it slide to the deck. She crossed to the door to the laundry room, still unlocked. Had she thought it wouldn't be? Connie adjusted her grip on her glass knife, opened the door, and stepped into the house.

Sweetums

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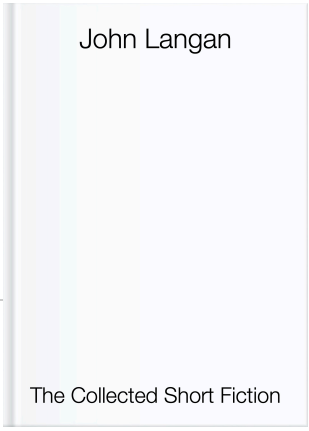

I

Feeney?" Keira said.

The cell phone reception here was terrible; her agent's voice cracked and snapped. "Yeah," Ralph was saying, "I know, but it's the only thing I could come up with. Times are tough in Tinseltown, same as everywhere else. If Feeney hadn't pissed off everybody and his uncle with his shit, there's no way I'd be able to get this for you. Fortunately, the guy's an auteur, which is to say, a fucking asshole. Not to mention, his last three films've done shit box office."

"I heard," Keira said. "Honestly, I'm amazed any studio would bankroll him."

"Any studio won't," Ralph said. "Guy's toxic; no one'll touch him. Apparently, he's put together a group of private backers."

"Really?"

"Really. I did a little asking around."

"Who's cutting his checks?"

"Buncha guys from eastern Europe. Probably the Russian mob, looking to launder money."

"Jesus."

"Nah, I'm just fucking with you. The backers are from Hungary or Romania or some shit. From what I hear, they're on the up and up. Bastions of culture and all that."

"Huh," Keira said. "What's the film about?"

"I couldn't tell you. I wouldn't be surprised if Feeney doesn't know, himself. You see his last one? The one he made by intuition?"

“How long is the gig for?”

“Three weeks, with an option to extend for another three. Because you’re so busy.”

She wasn’t. The restaurant where she waited tables had cut her to Sunday night, which had become the last stop on its employees’ ways out the door. She said, “Where is it?”

“Feeney’s rented a warehouse on the waterfront. I’ll e-mail you the address. First day of shooting’s Monday. Bright and early: five a.m..”

“Ouch.”

“Again—because you’re so busy.”

“All right, all right.”

“So…?”

“I’ll take it. Of course I’ll take it.”

II

Keira pulled into the warehouse parking lot almost twenty minutes late. She was not as late as she could have been, considering how hung-over she was—how much alcohol was doubtless still coursing through her veins. Last night had brought her firing from the restaurant, after which, her (former) co-workers had insisted on taking her out to the bar across the street—though she had suspected they were as much celebrating their own continued employment as they were commiserating her termination. She had intended to tell them about his gig with Feeney, had felt the news washing closer to the tip of her tongue with each rum-and-Coke, but had been unable to consume enough liquor to release it into speech. It wasn’t embarrassment at working with such a well-known flake—an acting job was an acting job, and though this one didn’t sound like a leading role, even a few minutes on screen put her one step closer to the day when it would be her name over the title. She hadn’t let anyone know her good news, not her father, who kept track of how many weeks had passed since her walk-on part in the shampoo commercial, or her mother, who guaranteed her a position teaching drama at her prep school if she would move back east, or even her roommate, who met her anxieties about losing her job at the

restaurant by asking her when she was planning on moving out. She wasn't especially superstitious—well, no more than any other actor—but she had been seized, possessed by the conviction that, were she to reveal her change in fortune to her companions, her parents, her roommate, she would arrive early Monday morning to a deserted address.

So she had swallowed rum-and-Coke after rum-and-Coke, watching the interior of the bar lose focus, starting at the edges of her vision and moving steadily inwards, until the faces of her friends dissolved like pieces of butter sliding around a hot pan. With every drunk-driving PSA she'd ever heard overlapping in her ears, she'd driven home crouched over the wheel of her GEO Metro, which was also the position she'd maintained during her slightly-more-sober race back down I-710 a few hours later. Ahead, the moon was a doubloon balanced on the horizon. When she looked at the road, the satellite elongated, stretching into a pair of gold circles connected by a narrow bridge, an enormous, cartoon barbell. She did her best to ignore it.

The warehouse at which Feeney was shooting was somewhere on the outskirts of the Port of Los Angeles proper, heading in the direction of Long Beach. Within minutes of leaving the highway, Keira was hopelessly lost, unable to recognize or in some cases read the names on street signs. Then, a right turn, and there it was: a wrought-iron gate wide as the street it ended, the word VERDIGRIS suspended between a pair of parallel arches overhead. The left side was open; taped to the right was a piece of canary paper with "Actors Park In Lot 3" written on it in black marker. The doom that Keira had felt pressing her into the steering wheel was pushed up by a wave of euphoria. She sped through the opening. Lot 3 was located to the left side of the warehouse. What were the chances that anything was underway, yet? It was a Monday morning, for Christ's sake. She locked the car and half-ran towards the warehouse.

The place was enormous. If you had told her they docked the container ships inside it and loaded them there, she could have believed it. Eight, ten storeys high, hundreds of yards long, it seemed less of a building and more of a wall, a great barrier built to keep out something vast. The nearer she drew, the smaller she felt. It was like the wall in *King Kong*, except the

beast this was to restrain was no overgrown ape, but a creature whose slimy bulk would blot out the sun. *I guess that makes me Fay Wray*.

The entrance to this part of the warehouse was surprisingly modest, a single door above which a bare bulb cast jaundiced light. A piece of legal paper reading “Actors” was thumbtacked to it. Keira was almost at the door when a pair of shapes detached from the surrounding shadows, one to her right, one to her left. Men, they were men. There was time for her to think, *Oh my God I’m going to be mugged*, for her heart to lurch, her arms to tense, and they were on her. The one to the right circled behind her; the one to the left circled in front. She snapped her head back and forth, the sudden motion making her stomach boil. The men moved with a long, leg-over-leg stride, more like dancers preparing to execute a leap than criminals preparing to beat and rob her. Their hands were up, not in a boxer’s guard, but higher, at their eyes. They were holding something to their eyes—cameras, small, rounded video cameras. She could see the red Record light lit on both. “Wait,” she said. “Wait.” The men continued their circling. “Shit.” She grinned, shaking her head more slowly. “Okay, okay. I get it.” She held up her hands. “I’m Keira Lessingham. I’m part of the cast.” The men continued filming. They appeared to be dressed the same: black, tight-fitting turtlenecks, brown corduroys, and black Doc Martens. She could not see their faces, though one was wearing a black beret. “I’m, uh, I guess I’ll just go in, then.” The men continued circling. Keira walked through them to the door and opened it.

III

A narrow corridor receded into the warehouse. Heart still knocking against her ribs, Keira walked up it. The passageway was lit by a series of round, blotchy bulbs hanging in space, a row of poisoned suns leading her into blackness, to a gap in the wall to her right. She stepped through, and found herself on a city street. The set was not the most elaborate she’d been on, but taking into account Feeney’s limited resources, it was not unimpressive. Across a wide, cobblestoned street, the brick façade of a low row of apartments was pierced by an archway large enough for a small car to drive through. Stationed along the sidewalk in front of the apartments, one to a doorway, black lampposts whose crowns curved into question marks

cradled frosted glass globes that coated the scene with thick, creamy light. Above the apartments, the spire of what was probably a cathedral occupied the near distance; a fairly convincing night sky filled the background. She might have been in some small, middle-European city, one of the places her parents had dragged her to when she was younger and they were trying to inoculate her with culture, a settlement against whose stone walls the tides of invasion, religion, and nationalism had risen and fallen for millennia.

"Finally."

Keira turned to her left, and there was Feeney with a pair of camera men—possibly the same two who had swept down on her outside the warehouse: it was difficult to be certain, because this pair also began circling her, and she was trying to focus on the director.

He was not shorter than Keira had expected—wasn't that the impression most people reported on meeting a celebrity? Keira had never had a sense of Feeney being anything other than average height, even short. His hair stood up in a pompadour that made his forehead seem exposed, his eyes surprised. He was wearing a long wool coat that was either navy blue or black. Around a cigarette that had been smoked almost to the filter, he said, "Great. You can stay where you are. Actually, come forward a couple of steps. Now take half a step to your right. Good." He looked to the camera men, who had stopped their movement. "One of you over there," he said, pointing to the archway, "and the other…here." He gestured to a spot ten feet to Keira's left. "Right. You—"

Feeney was talking to him. "Uh, Keira Less—"

"Right, Keira. Let's see if you're up for this. You start here. You're on this street in—well, it doesn't really matter where. Someplace far from home. The natives don't speak English. You're in pretty rough shape. Actually, you're not that bad, but you feel like you are, okay? Put your hands in your pockets."

Keira jammed her hands into her jeans.

"All right. Roll your shoulders forward—hunch over. Not too much. Good. Okay. When I say, 'Action,' you're looking at that place." He pointed to the apartment row. "Something is going to happen. Something. I won't tell you what; I just want you to react to it."

Keira nodded. “Improvise.”

“React,” Feeney said. “Got it? Good.” He clapped his hands. “Okay! Ready?”

“Yes,” Keira said. The camera men held up their free hands in OK signs.

Feeney retreated a half-dozen steps in the direction Keira had come. “And…action.”

Four doors down from the archway, almost parallel with the spot where Feeney had positioned her, one of the apartment doors swung inward. *Guess he can’t afford to waste any time,* Keira thought. Light the color of dark honey filled the doorway. Somewhere inside that space, that light, a dark shape moved forward—pushed forward, as if struggling through the light. If it was a man—and how could it be anything else?—he was huge, so broad it was hard to believe he would be able to squeeze out onto the front stoop. The silhouette of his head was round, what was visible of his shoulders rough, as if he were wearing a fur coat, or covered in a heavy pelt, himself. Keira could hear the floorboards the man was crossing shrieking with the burden. Without being aware of it, she had withdrawn her hands from her pockets and raised one to her mouth, the other in front of her. Something about the man’s movement was off, out of kilter in a fundamental way Keira could recognize but not articulate. It was curiously *soft*, as if the man were nothing but a heaping of flesh, the near end of a monstrous worm. The response it evoked in her was immediate, profound: Keira was more afraid than she could remember ever having been; her arms and legs trembled with it. It was intolerable that she should see any more of the figure in the doorway. She looked back the way she had entered the set, but could not find the opening in the wall, only the façade of another apartment row. Feeney was nowhere to be found. When Keira turned back to the street, she saw the man occluding the doorway. Almost before she knew it, she was running, her feet carrying her across the street and into the archway through the apartment building.

The camera man stationed to the right of the arch tracked her passage smoothly.

IV

For a moment, her footsteps chased one another around the tunnel. Then she was in a large courtyard, the empty center of a square whose sides were further blocks of apartments. In the far right corner of the square, an alley offered the only egress she could see from the space. Keira ran towards it. It seemed to take twice as long to cross the distance as it should have. All the while, she was aware of the archway gaping behind her, the naked space surrounding her.

By the time she reached the mouth of the alley, her chest was heaving, her blouse sodden. Though crowded with metal trashcans, the alley appeared passable. Feet sliding on rotten peels and soggy papers, Keira ran along the alley, narrowly avoiding a collision with an overflowing trashcan whose crash would have directed her pursuer straight to her. Above, on the walls to either side, fire escapes held their ladders just out of reach, taunting her. Ahead, the alley ended in a brick wall. The panic that flared in her was as quickly extinguished by her realization that this alley t-junctioned another. She turned right, saw an opening in the wall now to her left, and ducked through it.

Except for a large, bright rectangle glowing to her left, the long room she had entered was dark. The carbon reek of charcoal threaded the air, as if a fire had scoured the place in the recent past. In between where she was standing and the block of light, dark lines formed rectangles and squares of varying dimensions. As she moved closer to them, she saw that they were the frames of uncompleted walls, their timbers blackened and notched. A motor whirred softly somewhere in front of her. In the center of the bright space, a shape loomed.

Blood surged in Keira’s ears. How had the man found her so quickly? She was already half-turned the way she had come when her brain caught up with what her eyes had seen. The figure in the light was Feeney, his head and shoulders, anyway. The steady whir was the sound of a blocky projector resting on a camp table, casting the director’s image onto a burnt wall. The footage was rough, the timecode running in the lower right corner. Keira approached the projector. Feeney had been shot facing right, in three-quarter profile. He was holding a bulky phone to his left ear, a freshly-lit cigarette between his teeth. With a pop that made her jump, the audio thundered on, catching Feeney mid-sentence.

“—sweetums,” he was saying. “My little turd.” He paused. “It’s the Sign.” Another pause. “No. Not about the Sign, it is the Sign.” Pause. “How can —” Pause, during which he removed the cigarette from his mouth, considered its white length, and returned it to its place. “What does any of that have to do with me?” Pause. “No.” Pause. “No.” Pause. “Don’t be ridiculous, sweetums. Don’t be stupid.” Pause. “Yes you are being stupid. Why are you being so Goddamned stupid?” Pause. “Because it isn’t like anything. It’s not a metaphor, my little turd.” Pause. “You are my little turd. My little piece of shit.” Pause. “Sweetums. How I’m going to enjoy fucking you, you little turd. How I’m going to enjoy fucking the shit out of you, you little piece of shit. Oh yes I am.” Pause. “I am.”

A shoe scraped the floor. Keira spun, and found herself facing one of the camera men, the red Record light shining on his camera. “Jesus.” The man offered no response. Keira’s cheeks flushed. Of course all of this was part of the movie. What had she thought it was? No doubt, there had been camera men stationed along the route she’d run. She hoped Feeney would be happy with the mix of relief and shame reddening her face.

Behind the camera man, a doorway led out of the room into another. Keira considered leaving this place in favor of a return to the alley that had brought her to it; however, the prospect of encountering the man (it had to be a man) whose presence had produced such a dramatic response from her was sufficiently unwelcome to send her around the camera man and into the adjoining room.

V

Heavy, mustard-colored curtains blocked her way. Keira pushed them to the left, searching for a part. The fabric was grimy against her fingertips. Dust and mildew rose in clouds around her. She sneezed once, twice. She found the end of the curtain, pulled it up, and passed under it.

She was standing in a small, dimly-lit space whose walls consisted of the mustard curtains. In front of her, a man sat behind a typewriter supported by a card table that quivered as his thick fingers stabbed its keys. The man’s longish hair was more brown than red, unlike the beard that flared from his cheeks, which was practically orange. His broad face was pink, puffy, the

blood vessels broken across it mapping a route signposted with empty siblings of the bottle of Jack Daniels stationed at the typewriter's left. At the same time, there was a certain open, even unguarded quality to his eyes that made him appear oddly innocent. As Keira watched, the man tugged the page on which he'd been working free of the typewriter and held it up for scrutiny. His brow lowered, his lips moving soundlessly. Maybe halfway through his reading of it, he smashed the paper between his hands, crushed it into a ball and dropped it to the wood floor, where it joined a host of similar casualties. The man took a measured pull from the bottle of liquor, then selected a fresh sheet from the stack of paper to the typewriter's right side and spun it onto the roller. His fingers resumed their assault on the keys.

Was this guy an actor? It was hard to think what else he might be. Keira surveyed the folds of the curtains. Almost immediately, she saw a red Record light shining in one of the recesses to the right. So the guy was part of the movie. Keira wasn't sure how to proceed. Feeney hadn't covered what to do when she encountered another cast member. Unless his instruction to "react" had been intended to cover everything that was to follow that initial command of "action." The man appeared to be talking to himself. Keira approached him.

It was difficult to hear the man above the clattering of the keys. His voice was sanded smooth by a Southern drawl whose precise origins Keira could not place. He was saying, "Not dreaming, but in Carcosa. Not dead, but in Carcosa. Not in Hell, but in Carcosa. Why then I'll fit you. A true son of Tennessee. Jesus, what an asshole. Come, let us go, and make thy father blind. This was the creature that was once Celia Blassenville. Thus the devil candies all sins over. Excellent hyena! I would have you meet this bartered blood. What creature ever fed worse, than hoping Tantalus? Welcome, dread Fury, to my woeful house. The evil of the stars is not as the evil of earth. 'Tis true, 'tis true; witness my knife's sharp point. Why, this is hell, nor am I out of it. And touched a cold and unyielding surface of polished glass. Rhubarb, O, for rhubarb to purge this choler! There sits Death, keeping his circuit by the slicing edge. *Solomon miseris socias habuisse doloris*. I'll find scorpions to string my whips. Vergama leaned forward from his chair, and turned the page. I account this world a tedious theater. And while Grom

howled and beat his hairy breast, death came to me in the Valley of the Worm. Nothing but fear and fatal steel, my lord. Continually, we carry about us a rotten and dead body. No mask? This banquet, which I wish may prove more stern and bloody than the Centaurs' feast. You have seen the King…? Man stands amaz'd to see his deformity in any other creature but himself. Where flap the tatters of the King. It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God. In dim Carcosa. In lost Carcosa. In dead Carcosa."

The man reached forward and pulled the page from the typewriter. This time, he sampled the bottle while he was scanning it. As before, he had not completed reading it when he crumpled the page and let it fall to the floor. While he rolled a clean sheet into the typewriter, Keira knelt and picked up the closest ball of paper. On one knee, she eased the mass apart and smoothed it over her other knee.

The paper was blank. Keira looked at the man, who had resumed his typing and was repeating his monologue. "When then I'll fit you." Strictly speaking, there was no reason for there to be anything typed on the sheet, but given the ferocity with which the man was punching the keys, she had expected to find something on the page, even random combinations of letters and numbers. "Thus the devil candies all sins over." She had wondered if the guy might be transcribing his weird monologue, which was what she would have done. "Welcome, dread Fury, to my woeful house."

A burst of hammering made Keira leap to her feet. From the other side of at least one of the curtains, sounds of rapid construction—hammers pounding nails; saws chewing wood; lumber clattering together—drowned out the typewriter's chatter. The man did not appear to notice them, nor did the camera man filming him. Was the noise coming from the left? She was reasonably sure it was. There seemed little point in remaining here. She supposed she could attempt to speak to the man, but she was reluctant to break into whatever state the guy was in. React, right? She would react by investigating the source of the building sounds. Keeping near to the curtains, she passed around the man at the typewriter. There was a part in the curtains she could slip through. As she did, a glance back showed the view over the man's shoulder. Though his fingers drove the typewriter's

keys down in steady rhythm, none of the corresponding typebars rose to imprint the paper with its symbol.

VI

Keira emerged on the right side of a shallow stage facing an empty auditorium. Center stage, half a dozen men were busy with a wooden box whose proportions suggested a coffin stood on one end; albeit, a coffin for a man a good foot and a half taller than Keira. Dressed in the same black turtlenecks, brown corduroys, and black boots as the other camera men she had encountered, these men had traded in their cameras for an assortment of tools. Without the cameras obscuring their faces, Keira could see that the men resembled one another to a degree that was unusual, even artificial. Bald, their protuberant eyes stretching heavy lids, mouths wide, lips thin, their skin rendered sallow by the bank of lights shining overhead, the men might have been brothers from an almost comically large family. Undoubtedly, they had been made up after the same model; although why Feeney should have cared for his camera men's appearances, Keira couldn't say. Maybe they had parts in the film, too; maybe she would be required to record some of the day's performances.

She had drawn near enough to the activity for one of the men to turn to her and say, "Beautiful, innit?" He spoke with an approximation of a lower-class English accent, Dick Van Dyke playing the cockney in *Mary Poppins*. Keira nodded and said, "What is it?"

The man stared at her as if amazed. "What is it? Did you seriously just ask what this is?"

"I'm sorry. I'm new, here—this is my first day on set, and—"

"This is—come over here," the man said, waving her closer. "Come on, don't be shy."

From the front, Keira saw that the box was at least twice as wide as a coffin. A door that slid to the left disclosed a narrow compartment on the right. She thought of a photo booth, especially when she saw the row of green buttons set in the compartment's left-hand panel. A pair of slots had been cut in the wood above the buttons, the topmost level with a person's face, the one below set approximately throat-high. Below the green buttons,

a pair of holes had been drilled in the panel, the upper level with a person's waist, the lower set approximately thigh-high. "This," the man said, "is the King's Beneficence."

"The King's…?"

The man sighed. "You're not from around these parts, are you?"

"No," Keira said. "I mean, I am now, but I'm from New York. Originally."

"You don't say?" the man said. "If you're a denizen of the Old Imperial, then you should be well-acquainted with the Lethal Chamber."

"I, uh, no, I'm afraid I'm not."

"Catlicks, your people?"

Her parents? "Episcopalians," Keira said. When the man frowned, she said, "Anglicans."

"Ah," the man said. "Say no more. This," he gestured at the box, "is the means by which a man—or a woman—with a mind to might make his—or her—own quietus, to quote old Will-I-Am of Avalon. Only, instead of a bare bodkin, you've got your choice of these four buttons."

Her arm stretched out, Keira leaned toward the compartment, only to have the man catch her other arm and haul her back, shouting, "Are you out of your bleedin mind?" At the expression on Keira's face, the man said, "Right, right, you don't know." Releasing her from his grip, the man bent over and picked up a slender piece of wood the length of a yardstick. "'Bout time for a test, anyway," the man said, and tapped the closest button with the wood.

Something bright and metal shot out of the top slot and hung quivering in the air. A broad, flat tongue of steel, its razor edge shone. "The King's Philosophy," the man explained, "with which he relieves us of the burden of our thoughts." He moved the tip of his improvised pointer to the next button and pushed.

From the next slot down, something flashed out and around. Wider than the blade above, this one curved in a crescent inlaid with fine filigree. "The King's Counsel," the man continued, "with which he relieves us of the burden of our words." He shifted the sword to the third button and triggered it.

A pointed length of steel thrust out of the upper hole. When it reached its limit, a dozen blades sprang into a corona around its head. The man said, “The King’s Sup, with which he relieves us of the burden of our appetites.” He pushed the fourth and final button.

From the lower hole, a bundle of needles sprang forward, twisting first to the left, then to the right. “The King’s Chastity,” the man concluded, with which he relieves us of the burden of our desires.” He dropped the piece of wood. “Well, that’s all right, then. Oi!” he shouted. “One of you lot reset the Beneficence.” No one replied. “You see?” he said to Keira.

“But,” she said, “I mean, I know things can get bad, believe me, but even if they do, would you—I mean—you could take some pills, or—”

“Don’t you worry about it,” the man said.

Stage left, there was a commotion on the other side of the curtains: someone shouting, the scuff of boots on wood, the curtain swelling. A trio of camera men shoved through to the stage. Their arms were linked, as if they were the world’s shortest chorus line. Not to mention, least-coordinated: the man in the middle was badly out of step with his fellows. This, Keira saw, was because he was struggling against his companions.

“Well well well,” the man beside Keira called. “The prodigal son makes his entrance.”

At his declaration, the man in the middle glanced up from his contest and, seeing the King’s Beneficence, began to scream, “No! No! Not now! Not now!” He succeeded in tearing his left arm free of his fellow’s grasp, only to have the man on his right pivot in to him and drive his fist into his gut. The captive man folded at the waist like a marionette whose strings have been scissored. The other two took him under the arms and dragged him towards the box.

The remaining camera men had retrieved their cameras and were filming their companions’ progress. As the trio passed in front of her, the captive man turned his face to Keira and, in the wheeze of a man whose lungs have been emptied of air, said, “Do you know what this means? Do you?”

“It means what it means, old son,” the man beside Keira said. “It’s the Sign, is what it is.”

While his fellows were preparing to force him into the compartment—from which all deadly accessories had been retracted—the captive man made one final attempt at escape. But the others were ready for him, and the one punched him in the head, the other splayed his hand on the captive man's chest and shoved. Hands covering his head, the man stumbled backwards through the opening in the box. His companions wasted no time in sliding the door closed over it. Keira's last glimpse of the man was of his hands dropping from his face, his features a mix of terror and profound sadness. Once the door was shut, the men secured it with a trio of brass locks.

"Wait—" Keira said, but already, the camera men had begun to chant, "Choose. Choose. Choose," one word repeated in steadily-escalating volume. "Hang on," she said to the man beside her. He ignored her in favor of the chant. "Choose. Choose. Choose."

From within the King's Beneficence, the captive man shouted, "You can go fuck yourselves!"

In answer, the camera men raised their voices another notch. "Choose! Choose! Choose!"

"Do you think I'm going to do this? Just because it happened before, do you think it's going to happen now?"

"Choose! Choose! Choose!"

"Stop it! Stop this right fucking now!"

"Choose! Choose! Choose!"

"Don't you understand what's happening?"

If any of the camera men did, he did not share it. Instead, the group roared, "CHOOSE! CHOOSE! CHOOSE!"

"God damn you! God damn you all to hell!"

"CHOOSE! CHOOSE! CHOOSE!"

Keira had had enough. Eyes straight ahead, she walked off the stage, exiting the direction the captive man and his fellows had entered, stage left.

VII

The other side of the mustard curtain was a short hallway at the end of which a fire door opened on a cul-de-sac. To the left, an alley cornered to the right. Across from her, a metal staircase climbed a brick wall to a doorway. To her right, a camera man stood amidst a herd of trash cans, recording Keira as she considered what might lie around the alley's turn before opting to cross to the stairs and hurry up them.

At the top, she hesitated. A hallway like the one that had brought her into the warehouse stretched in front of her, a similar procession of mottled lights keeping utter darkness at bay. It occurred to her that she was, if not completely lost, uncomfortably close to being so. Should she retrace her steps, try to find her way back to the entrance? It would mean returning to the camera men and the bizarre scenario they were enacting, which she had no desire to do. Okay, the King's Beneficence was some kind of special effect—it had to be; she couldn't imagine Feeney presiding over a snuff film—but she had little taste for torture porn. Were she to step onto that stage again, no doubt she'd be met by a pool of stage blood, seeping out from under the box's door, or, worse, a wash of pig or cow blood, splashed for maximum realism.

Straight ahead it is, then. Besides, there were camera men all over the place. When she needed to find her way out of here, she could ask directions from one of them.

Her footsteps were loud, as if the space beneath the floor were hollow. Echoes of her passage lagged behind, raced ahead of her. Were the lights growing farther apart? She looked over her shoulder. They were: at least twice as much space separated the nearest globes as did those by the doorway. The next bulb was more distant still. Nor could she detect the red light of any of the camera men.

To the right, someone was walking beside her. With a gasp, Keira turned and, for a moment, did not recognize the dimly-lit woman staring back at her in equal surprise. Then she realized she was seeing herself, reflected in a large, rectangular window. "Shit." She approached the window. Through her ghostly image, she saw a bare room in which a desk lamp cast canary-colored light onto a plain table. There were chairs on either side of the table, the one on Keira's left pushed in to the table, the one on her right slid back several feet out of the light by the man seated on it. She couldn't distinguish

much of him, mostly a long black or navy-blue coat and a haze of cigarette smoke floating around his head. *Feeney?* What was he doing here? Behind him, a camera man kept record of the scene.

A door in the wall on the other side of the table opened, and a woman entered the room. Tall, thin, wearing a black pantsuit, white blouse, and a necklace of black beads, her long hair dyed platinum blond (badly), she could have passed for Keira's mother—for herself in another dozen years, if time were unkind to her. She thought of the camera men. Was this why Feeney had hired her, because she resembled one—or more—of the actors he already had cast for the film?

The woman tugged the chair away from the table, reversed it, and straddled it, folding her arms on its back. "Well," she said, and Keira heard her, her voice carried by a speaker set above the window. The quality was poor; she sounded flat, tinny.

The man in the chair said, "Kay." Keira couldn't tell if it was Feeney, speaking.

"Don't," Kay said.

"Just talk," the man said. "Say something."

Without pause, Kay said, "I heard about Laceration Parties when I was still pretty new to this place. There was this girl from Vancouver I used to hang out with once in a while. Kirsten or Karen—I think it was Karen. She used to say, 'It's Vancouver, Seward, not the Vancouver in Canada.' Maybe it was Kirsten. Big girl. There was a tavern near one of the more popular King's boxes, The Debt Owed, where we'd stand at the bar and let failed businessmen and despondent troubadours buy us rounds of Pernod while they worked themselves up for the Beneficence. Anyway, it was during a particularly slow night that Karen, I'm pretty sure her name was, told me about these parties, these soirees, a friend had been invited to. In the hills, somewhere near the Observatory. It was just the A list at it, it was the A+ list, the A++ list. Supposedly, the King, himself, had put in an appearance; although Kirsten's friend hadn't seen him, personally. At the door, the guests had been met by a butler who presented them with a ceramic bowl full of razor blades. Everybody picked one for later. The friend had been a little vague as to exactly what had happened later, but her left hand and

forearm were heavily bandaged, and she claimed she couldn't move a couple of her fingers, anymore.

"I'd been in this place long enough not to doubt the story. I didn't think I'd ever attend one, though. Not because of any moral reservations; I just couldn't see myself being allowed to mingle with the upper crust—with the powdered sugar sprinkled on top of the upper crust.

"That was before René. If you'd told me I would let a corpse-driver set foot on the same street as me, let alone lay his hand on me…I knew he was, I guess 'interested' is as good a word as any. He would drive past the booth I was working twice a day, once on his way to the morgue, the second time on his way to Potter's Field. They never repeat a route unless something's caught their attention. I knew the risks of acknowledging, let alone encouraging, his notice. Several of the girls I'd met when I came here decided to find out what lay on the other side of the mortuary doors, and I never saw any of them again. I also knew that, without my consent, the corpse-driver's designs would remain hypothetical. Despite the rumors, they adhere to the Compact religiously. It took years before I granted him recognition. It wasn't that he won me over; it wasn't that I had a death-wish, either. There was nothing else left for me: every other avenue had dead-ended. So I made eye contact, raised my left hand with the palm out, and let what would come next, come.

"There was no romance, no spark, no magic moment I realized he was the same as me. To be honest, I'm not one hundred percent sure why he kept me around. It was months until I could stand to have him touch me, and that was only under the influence of a good bottle of Pernod. I've never gotten used to the way his flesh feels; I still jump anytime he puts his hands on me. The smell of formaldehyde makes me ill, and I have zero interest in what he does with the bodies in the back chambers.

"But there are consolations to the role of corpse-driver's companion. The money's not bad, and even better, there's the prestige, this weird, oblique status that allows you access pretty much everywhere. I hadn't understood this the day I recognized him, that eventually, he would be my passport to a Laceration Party. It was in the hills, near the sign. What a sight we must have made, him in that tiny bowler hat and the fur coat, me in a feathered

dress and boa. Not to mention, him five times the size of me—of pretty much everyone there.

"At the front door, a kid in a tuxedo held up a wooden bowl layered with razor blades for us to choose from. I took one; René didn't, which should've kept him out of the Party, but really, who was going to refuse him? The house was full of celebrities and people too powerful to be celebrities. The deeper into it you moved, the higher the profile of your company climbed, until you were in a room whose original purpose you couldn't guess with people whose names you didn't know. That was where the razors were put to use. More or less in the center of the room, there was a stainless steel table with a woman lying on it, nude. I'm not sure what process had led to her being there. One by one, the people in the room walked up to her, surveyed the length of her body, and chose a spot on which to employ their razors. The only rule seemed to be that you were not allowed to slice an artery or vein. After you were finished, you cast your blade into a plastic bucket under the table.

"By the time my turn came around, the floor around the table was slick with blood. I stood beside the woman, whose body was a patchwork of exposed muscle and nerve. I had avoided looking at her face, which had remained untouched. I'm not sure why. But I could feel it, dragging my eyes up the bloody reach of her toward it. The second I saw her, I knew her: Karen, or Kirsten, my old crony from The Debt Owed. She remembered me, too; I'm positive of it. There wasn't any fear or anger in her gaze, just a kind of blank fascination. I pressed the razor to her right eyelid, and drew it across.

"When I was done, I straightened, and there was the King, leaning over the other side of the table from me. They say only one person at a time ever sees him, and I guess that's true, because around me, the partiers carried on as if nothing were happening. For a long, long time, while Karen's eyes filled up with blood that spilled onto the table, the King considered me, and I him. He reached out his right hand, and I saw that he was wearing a white cotton glove. He touched the tip of his index finger to Kirsten's eye, and the blood climbed the thirsty fibers, dyeing the lower half of his finger scarlet. He nodded, drew back a step, and the crowd kind of closed around him. I didn't tell René what had happened, but I did hold onto that razor blade.

“So I’ve seen the King and lived to tell the tale. Everyone always makes a big deal about his face; you know, ‘No mask? No mask!’ As if he’s any different from the rest of us. As if all of us aren’t naked for the world to see.”

This time, Keira was not surprised by the camera man to her left; she supposed she must have heard him approach. Beyond him, she could distinguish a doorway through which amber light reached into the hallway. She stepped around the man, and headed for the doorway.

VIII

The room she entered reminded Keira of nothing so much as the living room of her parents’ brownstone. In front of a round of bay windows, an old television whose blocky dimensions suggested an altar broadcast footage of Feeney to an abbreviated couch and a recliner. Some error in the TV’s settings tinted the screen goldenrod. The director had been shot in three-quarter profile, facing right. He was holding a bulky phone to his left ear, a freshly-lit cigarette between his teeth. Keira knelt and twisted the volume knob clockwise. The soundtrack was playing whomever he was talking to. Their voice was flat, tinny; they were in mid-sentence.

“—about the sign?” There was a pause, as the voice waited for a reply Feeney did not deliver. “What does that even mean? It’s a movie.” Pause. “You know what? Forget about it,” the voice continued, as Feeney removed the cigarette from his mouth, considered its white length, and returned it to its place, “it’s not important. What is is that I’m here, in this fucking…I’m here, and everything is wrong. I don’t know where to start. The Goddamned sky, for Christ’s sake.” Pause. “You’re the one who brought me here, asshole.” Pause. “Yes, you did.” Pause. “Yes, you fucking did.” Pause. “I’m not being stupid.” Pause. “It’s like—” Pause. “Fuck you. You do not talk to me like that.” Pause. “Fuck you. You’re the piece of shit.” Pause. “You try to lay a finger on me, and I’ll cut it off.” Pause. “Fuck you.”

Keira stood. Framed by the archway that led to the front hall, a camera man filmed her crossing the room. Passing in front of him, and unlocking the front door.

IX

She emerged into a wide, flat space—a parking lot—the parking lot outside the warehouse. It was dark, the sky full of stars. Except for her car, the lot was empty. Had she spent the entire day inside? She didn't feel as if that much time had passed, and yet, here it was night. She supposed she could return to the warehouse, but a wave of exhaustion rose over her. Just being around all of that…whatever you wanted to call it had left her legs weak, her head light. Missing lunch and, from the looks of it, dinner probably hadn't helped, either. Behind her, the door she had exited clicked shut. That settled the matter. Within a minute, she was behind the wheel of the Metro, driving out the gate to the place.

The highway was quiet. Good. She would be home sooner rather than later. It was unlikely she'd manage enough sleep, but she'd take what she could get. Call time tomorrow was 5:00am, again. *Ugh*. Ahead, the full moon hung golden over the hills. She could not remember it ever having been so near, so enormous, the vague face suggested by its topography so apparent. For a moment she had the impression that something enormous had inclined its attention towards her.

Tires ringing on the road, a convoy of eighteen-wheelers swept around her. The windows of their cabs were tinted; rather dangerous for traveling at night, she judged. The trailers were flatbeds, each festooned with a holiday's worth of blazing colored lights, as was the cargo lashed to it. Such was the glare that Keira could not distinguish what the trucks were transporting until they pulled away from her, when she saw that the squared frames ribboned in crimson, mauve, and lemon lights belonged to gallows, their nooses dancing in the rushing air.

As quickly as they had surrounded her, the trucks were gone, their taillights red points in the distance. Keira's eyes were sufficiently dazzled that, at first, she mistook the second moon rising into the sky for an illusion.

Hyphae

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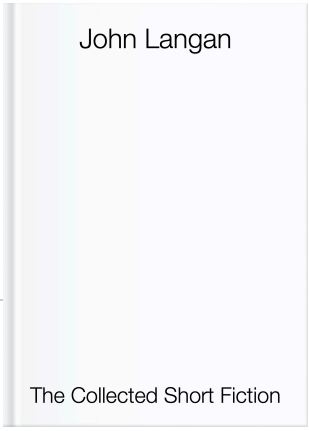


The house was in worse shape than he'd anticipated, the roof warped, the siding faded, the window frames clearly rotten. The yard was a mess, too, grass grown hay-high and yellowed, the ornamental bushes either gone or overgrown. The driveway had never been the best—his father had refused to blacktop it, insisting it was perfectly passable—and the rain and snow of the last fifteen years had only deepened its ruts. The bottom of his Subaru scraped an exposed rock and James winced.

Who knew if his key would fit the front lock anymore? He rolled to where he remembered the driveway ending and shut off the engine. His father had not taken his mother's departure especially well; it would not be a surprise for him to have swapped out the locks. James stepped out of the car. If he couldn't enter the house, then that was his obligation fulfilled, right? He could imagine what his sister, housebound following her C-Section, would say to that.

His key slid home easily; the lock released without struggle. With a sigh, he pushed open the front door.

The smell that rushed out made him step back.

"God…"

It was the rotten milk-and-mold stench of strong cheese left to liquefy in the sun. He leaned towards it, recoiled, tried again.

"Dad?"

The smell flooded his sinuses. He breathed through his mouth.

"Hello? Dad? It's James." *Your gay son,* he almost added, but decided to forego the hostilities for the moment. Was his father even here? Cupping his hand over the lower half of his face, he entered the house.

He expected to find the living room littered with months of dirty dishes, the putrefying remains of half-eaten meals the source of the odour his hand did nothing to shield him from. It was clean, as were the dining room and the kitchen, his father's room and the bathroom. His and Patricia's old rooms had been repurposed to TV room and sewing room, respectively, but neither held anything worse than mild clutter.

"Dad?"

He opened the refrigerator. Except for the water jug, it was empty, as were the oven, the toaster oven and the microwave. Did he need any more proof that his father was not here—had been gone, from the looks of it, for some time? But, but … he ducked his head into the bathroom. His father's toiletries were ranged around the sink. Not out of the question for him to have purchased new ones, of course, if it weren't out of keeping with a lifetime's parsimony. A rummage through the closet in his father's room revealed no gaps in its shirts, slacks and jackets, no ties missing from his accumulated father's day and birthday presents—which appeared to lend weight to his father having stayed put.

"In a house with no food," he said, returning to the kitchen. The basement door was closed, but he supposed he should check downstairs, too. His father's workbench was there, behind the furnace, the home to a collection of power tools that had frightened James when he was younger, in no small part due to the lurid cautions his father had given him about each one. *This'll slice your hand clean off. This'll burn the eyes out of your head. This'll take the flesh from your arm before you know what's happened.* Strange to think James had wound up living with a carpenter.

At the basement door, he paused. Downstairs had been his father's retreat. After a bad day at IBM or especially after an argument with James' mother, he would throw open the door, tromp down the stairs and clatter about his workbench. Sometimes, James would hear the power tools screaming, smell sawdust burning, as his father threw himself into one project or another, cutting wood for the new mailbox he was always on the verge of building, or fashioning a new trellis for the front porch. He had spent ever more time down there in the couple of years prior to James' departure for Cornell and, from what Patricia had told him, before their mother had walked out, he had practically been living in the basement.

The conflict that had come to define his parents' marriage had had a single subject: his father's health, specifically, the horrible state of his feet. It was beyond funny; it was absurd to think that such a topic could have undone 25 years together, but, in all fairness to his mother, there had been something seriously wrong with his father's feet. The toenails had been thick, jaundice-yellow, like bits of horn sprouting from the ends of his toes. The toes, the sides of his feet, had been fish-belly pale, the heels gray and traversed by cracks from which thin, almost ghostly fibers projected. Nor had their appearance been the worst of it: Their smell, an odour of stale sweat mixed with the muddy reek of mildew, had made sitting next to him when his feet were uncovered an act of endurance. Mention the condition of his feet to him and he would flare with anger. James had not understood how the man who insisted on taking him to the doctor for the slightest sniffle could not tend to a part of himself so obviously unwell, and the sight of his father's bare feet had stirred in him an obscure shame. As he had grown older, adolescence had curdled his shame to contempt, as it had dawned on him that his father was afraid of what a visit to the doctor would tell him about his feet. In the last few years, contempt had mellowed to something like pity, though it was difficult not to feel a modicum of anger at his father's inertia.

He opened the basement door and was pushed back several steps by the fresh wave of reek that rushed over him. Gagging, his eyes watering, he threw his hand back over his mouth, his nose. "Jesus," he said, coughing. This was too much. He stumbled into the dining room, to the back door. He fumbled with the locks and flung the door wide, pushing the screen door out of the way and stepping onto the back porch and fresh air.

Wiping his eyes, his nose, he crossed to the other side of the porch. The smell clung to him. He inhaled deeply. Something caught in his throat and bent him double, coughing. He straightened, only for a second round of coughing to convulse him. His mouth filled with phlegm. He spat and what spattered on the porch was grey. "Shit." He remained hunched over until his lungs had calmed. His chest felt bruised, his throat raw. He stood, gingerly, and something in the tall grass behind the porch drew his notice.

It was a car, his father's car, the same red Saturn he'd been driving when James had left for college. Descending the porch's steps, James approached

the car. The thick layer of pollen lying yellow on it, obscuring its windows, testified to its having been parked here for some time. James felt a momentary surge of panic that his father might be seated in the car, dead of a heart attack or stroke. Heart pounding, he opened the driver's side door, bracing for the sight of his father's desiccated corpse. The car was empty. He sagged against it.

He dug his cell phone out of his jeans, flipped it open. No bars. He held it up, rotating slowly. Nothing. Terrific. Was the phone in the house still working? And what was he planning on saying to his sister if he reached her? "Dad isn't here and there's a weird smell coming from the basement"? He folded the phone and returned it to his pocket.

Maybe his shirt … he unbuttoned, untucked and removed it, then folded it into a rough scarf that he tied over his nose and mouth. Already, the faint odor of rotten milk and mold had attached to the fabric. It was bearable. James climbed to the porch and returned inside.

At least the basement light was working. He descended the stairs slowly, on the lookout for … what? Whatever was producing that smell. He'd never dealt with black mold; maybe that was the culprit. The odour pressed on his improvised mask. He concentrated on breathing through his mouth.

At the foot of the stairs, the water heater stood in its recess, closeted from the rest of the basement by a dark-brown door whose upper half was laddered with slats that allowed him to see the off-white cylinder and not much else. As a child, James had felt a prickle of unease at the base of his neck every time he'd passed in front of that door. Perhaps due to the design of the slats, each of which was set at a 45 degree tilt, light didn't reach very far into the alcove, leaving the walls of the recess invisible and giving the impression that the water heater stood at the near end of a large, dark space. When he was 14, he'd helped his father replace the tank and, although the closet had been well-lit by a pair of worklights his father had hung on the walls, James still had judged it unusually spacious for its purpose.

He was almost past the recess when his eye caught something through the slats, a wooden pole resting on the water heater. He slid his fingers under the lowest slat and eased to door open. It was the handle of a shovel, its blade rusted except for the edge, which was bright from use. On the floor

beside it, a pickaxe had fallen over. The points of its head shone. Bracing his hands on either side of the doorway, James leaned into the alcove.

To his left, a sizable hole had been chopped into the wall. Three feet wide by four and a half, maybe five feet high, its margin ragged, it appeared to extend into the earth behind the wall. James released the doorway and stepped around the water heater, in front of the hole. It was too dark for him to see into. He fished his cell from his jeans, unfolded it and turned the screen toward the blackness. Its pale light revealed a rough, narrow tunnel receding to an uncertain destination.

"Dad?"

Was that a reply? He called to his father a second time, stood listening for a response. None came. Holding his cell out before him, he ducked his head and advanced into the tunnel. It was a bit of a tight fit—his father was smaller than James by a good six inches and thirty pounds—but passable. The floor slanted down, while the walls curved gradually to the left. He looked over his shoulder. Already, the water heater was almost out of view. The passage appeared to have been hacked out of solid rock. He didn't know what type lay beneath the house, but his father had cut his way through it.

Where had he been going? Had he been building some kind of underground shelter? From what? His father had always been a man to follow his own impulses, to a fault and to extremes. Of course, there was the example of his feet, which James' mother had told him had become infected from something he'd picked up while on a business trip to Paris. A French colleague had taken him on a tour of the catacombs, during which he'd stepped into a deep puddle of foul water. His socks and shoes had been soaked. Who knew what had been swimming around in there and decided to hitch a ride on his father's skin. No doubt a treatment for Athlete's foot would have taken care of it, but the most his father would do for his feet was soak them in a basin of warm water. James could remember the expression on his father's face as he lowered his feet into their bath, agony that dissolved into something like pleasure.

Beyond his feet, and what he called his thriftiness and James his stinginess, there was his father's refusal to leave this house, despite what must have

been a decade-and-a-half campaign by James' mother to have them move. While James and Patricia had lived at home, their mother had argued that the house was too small, the school district substandard. After they'd left, she had insisted that the house was too much trouble to maintain, its location too remote. No matter her line of attack, his father's defense had been the same: This was their *home,* the emphasis he placed on the word substituting for hours of reasoning. From his mother, James knew that his father's early life had been rootless. Only son of a master sergeant in the Army, James' father and his mother had moved from New Jersey to what was then West Germany, from West Germany to Washington State, from Washington State to Kansas, from Kansas to Japan, from Japan to New York, where his grandfather had been killed in a car accident when James's father was thirteen. Afterwards, James's father and his mother had continued to wander, living with this relative or that until James's grandmother fell out with them and they went in search of a new place to stay. Even knowing the little he did about his father's early life—because the man refused to discuss it in any detail with him—James could appreciate what must have been a profound longing, a need, to have a home of his own. To insist on remaining in that spot at the expense of your marriage, however, went beyond need to pathology, a layman's diagnosis that appeared confirmed by the tunnel down which James was moving.

How far did this thing go? The air had grown noticeably cooler and damper. How deep did you have to dig for that to happen? The spoiled-milk-and mold-odour had grown strong enough to force its way through the fabric of his mask. Were the walls growing narrower? What would happen if he couldn't turn around in here? Dread pooled below his stomach, started to rise. *Relax. Relax.* He stopped, concentrated on breathing slowly and deeply. *You're fine. Relax.* The fear subsided.

He swept the cell phone up and around the stretch of tunnel he was standing in. Its blue-tinged glow showed only rock, nothing to account for the smell. Could it be some species of microorganism residing within the rock? Holding the cell phone in front of him, he continued forward.

Maybe fifteen feet ahead, the tunnel ended in darkness. Some kind of rock? Coal? Was there coal in these parts? It wasn't stone, he saw as he drew

nearer. The light went out into it, as if he were looking into space, which, he realised, he was. His father's tunnel had broken into a cave.

At the end of the passage, James halted, shining the cell phone back and forth. The light revealed a low ceiling arcing over something shining—water, a subterranean lake whose margins lay beyond his light's reach. Directly before him and to his right, a rock shelf gave the lake a shore. James set a tentative foot onto it. The rock held. He brought his other foot down beside it and, when the shelf did not crack and spill him into the water, began moving along it.

This must be part of the aquifer that supplied the house's well. Had his father been trying to reach this? How had he known about it?

To his right, a white rectangle lay on the floor. Bags—large bags made of heavy white plastic, a dozen or more flattened and stacked neatly. There was green lettering on the top one: "Ammonium Nitrate", under the words a percentage, "34.40% N", under that a measurement, "Weight 500kg", and finally, under that, "Produced in Ukraine." He knelt to check the other bags. More of the same. Wasn't this what the Oklahoma City Bomber had used as the active ingredient for his homemade bomb? Was that what his father was doing, planning to blow up the house from below?

No, that was ridiculous. One thing was certain: Whatever his purpose, his father had been here. James stood and continued along the shore, keeping close to the wall. Who knew how deep that water was? There couldn't be anything living in it, could there? An image of an eyeless fish, its skin translucent, flashed across his mind's eye. *Thanks,* National Geographic. When he came upon his father, it was almost anticlimactic. Back braced against the wall, he was standing with his hands in his trouser pockets, the casual pose of a man passing the time. Were it not for the detail that his pants were rolled above the knee, presumably to avoid dirtying them on the white fertiliser heaped most of the way up his shins, he might have been acting the punchline to an elaborate and overlong joke: *Oh, hi, son. What brings you here?*

"Dad!"

His father's eyes were closed, his lips parted. He did not respond to James' shout. James drew near the edge of the pile of fertiliser and stretched his

free hand to his father's chest. Through his shirt, his skin was distressingly soft. James waited. The rotten-milk-and-dirt smell was overwhelming; he could feel it filming the surface of his eyes. Under his fingertips, his father's chest stirred, barely enough to register. A thrill ran up James' arm. "Hang on, Daddy," he said. "I'm getting you out of this."

Dementia: That was the only answer that made any sense of … this. No doubt, his father had been sliding into it for far longer than any of them had realised. His refusal to depart the house suddenly seemed less stubbornness and more anxiety. A surge of pity swept over James. Placing the cell phone on the floor with its screen angled towards his father, he stepped into the fertiliser. He slid his hands between his father's arms and sides, bringing them up and around his back, hugging his father to him. God—there was nothing to him. How long had he been standing here? "Hold on, Dad," he said, lifting and stepping back. His arms sank into his father's back. His father's chest flattened against his. He tilted towards James, but did not come loose from the fertiliser. Grunting, James strained upwards. Between his arms and his chest, his father's trunk shifted, as if his bones had grown, not just brittle, but spongy. The reek of bad milk and mold clouded the air around them. He leaned back, pulling as hard as he could. Sweat tickled the sides of his face.

There was a sound like wet cardboard tearing and his father was free. Overbalanced, James fell, pulling him on top of him. The base of his skull cracked on the stone shelf, detonating fireworks in front of his eyes. A host of sighs escaped his father. Taking him by the shoulders, James gently rolled him onto his back. "Hold on," he said as he struggled to his feet, swaying with dizziness. Pressing the back of his head with one hand, he retrieved the cell phone with the other. He turned the screen to his father.

He did not scream at what the light disclosed. For a long time, his brain simply refused to register the gaps below his father's knees, insisting that he must be confusing the fertiliser caked on his father's skin with blankness, absence. In the same way, his brain would not acknowledge the long rents in his father's neck, the top of his chest, as anything more than shadows. The pale fronds pushed out of the ends of his legs, the vents in his neck and chest, the front of his shirt, were hair, dust, cobwebs. Not until his father's eyelids raised and revealed a pair of orbs speckled with rust-colored patches

did James make a sound, and that was a low moan, the utterance of an animal when it understands that the jaws of the trap have bitten deep into its leg and will not release it.

His father's mouth opened. The tip of his tongue appeared, trying to moisten his lips. His voice was a thin wheeze forced out. "Who?" he said.

James did not answer.

"Light," his father said, his eyelids lowering.

James did not move the cell phone.

With the weak, tentative motions of something very old or very sick, his father twisted from side to side. He was trying to flip over onto his stomach, which he could have accomplished more easily had he removed his hands from his pockets or if his legs had extended below the knees. Instead, he relied on his elbows and hips. It required several attempts. Once he had succeeded, he raised his head as if scenting the air and started a half-crawl towards the mound of fertiliser. His body scraped on the rock floor.

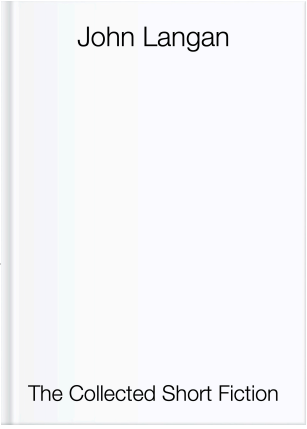
What sent James running from the cave and what had become of his father was seeing the things he was leaving in his wake and identifying them as pieces of his father, chunks of flesh that more resembled the pale meat of a large mushroom. That, and the white threads that rose out of the place where his father's legs had been immersed in the fertiliser, and that inclined towards him as he worked his way back towards it. When what had been his father shoved itself up onto the pile of fertiliser, it exhaled, the sound of something come home.

Cell phone in hand, James fled up the tunnel to the basement, roughing his hands, his head, on the rock, not caring, concerned only with escaping what he had witnessed. The knot of emotion in his chest was indescribable. He scaled the basement stairs three at a time, emerging into the kitchen and daylight that stung his eyes. He stumbled across the living room, out the front door to his car. As he was reversing up the driveway, he realised he was still wearing his improvised mask and breathing in the odour that had saturated it. He clawed it from his face, rolled down the window and flung it into the tall grass beside the driveway.

When he was almost home, James pulled to the side of the road, shifted the car into Park and screamed until the cords on his neck stood out, slamming

his hands against the steering wheel until it cracked on one side. When he could scream no more, he picked his cell phone up from where he'd flung it on the passenger's seat and dialed his sister's number. Her answering machine picked up. Voice hoarse, he told her he had changed his mind: He wasn't going to visit Dad, after all.

Bor Urus



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I love a big storm. I love the build-up to it: the meteorologists, flushed with their sudden importance, narrating the flow of the oranges and reds across the local maps; the supermarkets, crowded with people whose furrowed brows and pursed lips grant the soup cans and bottled water in their carts a promotion to provisions; the neighbors, diligently preparing their houses and yards for the high winds by rolling trash cans into the garage, securing the shutters as best they can. I love the storm itself: the house creaking as the wind moans against it; the rain rattling on the windows, reducing the yard to an impressionistic blur; the lightning burning the air white, the thunder shaking the walls. And I love the aftermath: the cautious step onto the front porch to survey the trees, their branches still saturated, bent; the walk around the house to pick up any items that were blown loose; the drive to town, to observe the storm's more general ruin.

It's the emotions that accompany each stage of the storm: I savor them. On one side, there's anticipation, a half-pleasurable dread at what's bearing down on us that makes the air hum, the way it does before any big event; on the other side, there's relief, which may also be tinged with dread at whatever damage awaits discovery, whatever crash must be sourced and reckoned with, but which is more an emptied-out feeling, as if, for a moment, we're as clear as the air the storm has just washed. In between dread and relief, though, is the most rarefied sensation, a terror at our utter powerlessness in the face of what's enveloped us, a panic at the trees whipping side to side deliriously, the power lines bouncing like jump ropes, the wineglasses ringing at each clap of thunder—which borders the ecstatic. When a storm is at its peak, and the world outside seems on the verge of tearing itself apart, a kind of radical openness comes briefly into view, as if, with each blanching of the view out the front window, something else, a more essential state of existence, draws that much closer to being unveiled.

At some point I began to suspect that my figurative response to the violence of a severe storm might be pointing me in the direction of actual truth. I was a teenager, fifteen, sixteen, that point of maximum narcissism when it seems entirely reasonable to think that you are privy to special insight, able to intuit secret knowledge. However, unlike so many of the other notions that occupied my brain at that time, which steadily decamped as my teens drained into my twenties, this one dug in more firmly. It was buttressed by bits and pieces of magazine articles read in waiting rooms, by fragments of documentaries stumbled upon while late-night channel-surfing. The details were fairly incoherent, but the gist of the theory I assembled was, if there are other dimensions, parallel universes, alternate planes of existence—call them what you will—then mightn't the tremendous release of energy in a serious storm unsettle, destabilize things sufficiently for that other place to be glimpsed, even entered? Anyone with a modicum of scientific knowledge, let alone actual expertise, on whom I tried out this line of reasoning treated it with a species of amused tolerance, much the way they probably would have a declaration of belief in alien visitation. This lack of support did nothing to unseat my conviction; in fact, it was during my twenties that I first ventured out into the midst of a storm, to see what I could see.

Of course, this was nothing, which I blamed on the fact that I sat in my car the entire time, listening to the rain bang on the roof. It did not stop me from repeating the experiment with subsequent storms. Soon I was starting the car, switching on the headlights, flipping on the wipers, and pulling out of the driveway in search of revelation.

For the next sixteen years it eluded me. About the closest I came was during a storm that came over while I was driving back from a trip up into the Catskills with my then-fiancée. All afternoon, tall heaps of cloud had loomed over the mountains, dimming the sky, then moving east. When the air thickened, however, humidity pressing on us like a great, damp hand, a storm seemed in the offing, and we agreed it would be best if we beat it back to our apartment. Just the other side of Woodstock, a handful of fat drops of rain burst on the windshield, and then the world outside was swept away by a wall of water. Afraid to brake into a hydroplane, I downshifted as quickly as I could, stabbing the button for the hazards. Engine whining, the

car slowed to a crawl, but even on fast, the wipers did little more than push the water screening the windshield back and forth. Lightning flashed, turning the rain into white neon, and the thunder that followed one-Mississippi two-Mississippi shook the car. I was already steering for the shoulder when the lightning repeated, the thunder answering one-Mississippi faster. Prin was telling me to pull over, the command a litany: "Pull over pull over pull over pull over pull over."

"I'm trying," I said, as lightning and thunder split the air together. Although I couldn't help my flinch, I wasn't worried as much about being electrocuted as I was about someone racing up behind and slamming into us. I knew the road wasn't that wide, the shoulder not that far away, but hours seemed to pass as the car eased to the right, lightning flaring like the flash of an overeager photographer, thunder overlapping, crashing into itself and forming an avalanche of sound that rumbled and roared over us. When I judged we had crossed onto the shoulder, I put the clutch in, shifted into neutral, and opened my door. I hadn't unbuckled my seatbelt, so I couldn't lean that far out of the car, and Prin didn't have to reach that far to grab my arm and haul me back inside. "Are you insane?" she screamed. "Close the door!"

I did.

"What were you thinking?" she continued, her eyes wide with terror. "There's a goddamn hurricane out there!"

"I was checking to make sure we were on the shoulder," I said, which was true: I was looking for the white strip that delineated the edge of the road. But once I'd pushed the door open and the immensity of the storm had rushed over me, I was swept by a feeling of such exaltation that the hand Prin had caught was stealing toward the release for my seatbelt. At her expression of utter fright, however, my exhilaration curdled to embarrassment. I took her hands and said, "It's okay."

"Asshole." She tugged her hands from mine.

"Yes, but I'm your asshole."

That brought a smile to her face, which disappeared as lightning stabbed the trees to our right, thunder cracking so loud it deafened us. Prin pressed herself into her seat as if it could conceal her, her hand groping for mine.

Sheets of rain layered the windows; I switched the wipers off. “It can’t last much longer,” I said, speaking too loudly because of the ringing in my ears. “These summer storms blow themselves out pretty quickly.”

Prin didn’t answer. I stared out the windshield, trying to distinguish the road through the water. For a moment the rain lessened, and the world in front of us swam into view. Maybe fifty yards ahead, the road rose in a slight incline, more an extended bump than a hill. On the other side of that rise, something was crossing the road from left to right. It was an animal, easily as big as an elephant. I briefly thought it was an elephant, had visions of an accident involving a convoy of circus animals. But the silhouette was wrong: the back was longer, the dip to the hips less pronounced, the head shorter, blunter, crowned by a pair of heavy horns as wide as my car was long. With each step it took, the animal’s head swung from one side to the other with a slowness that was almost casual, as if it were out for a stroll in a light mist, not a raging storm. My hand was back on the door handle, and then the rain picked up again, hiding the enormous profile behind a curtain of water. I opened my mouth; to say what, I didn’t know. I was waiting for the rain to ebb once more, allow another glance at whatever that had been. When it did not, I turned to Prin and said, “Did you see that?”

“What?” she said. Her brow was level, her mouth straight, her cheeks pale. She was angry, I realized; she had witnessed what I had, and the experience had made her furious.

“I—”

“Do you think you can drive out of here?”

I wanted to ask if she was serious, remind her that this was a car, not a submarine, but what I said was, “Yeah.”

Wipers whipping back and forth, defogger blowing, hazards blinking, I put the car into gear and turned toward the road. I was certain that I was going to drive into whatever had been crossing it. After five minutes passed with no collision, though, my hands began to relax their hold on the steering wheel, and once the dashboard clock had counted another five minutes I knew that, even crawling forward as we were, we had passed beyond the place the great animal had been. I felt, not relieved so much as *full,* as if what I had seen were inside me, straining against the walls of my chest. I

couldn’t seem to draw enough breath. The sensation persisted all the long drive back to our apartment in Wiltwyck, where Prin led me directly to the bedroom, tugged down her shorts and mine, and pulled me onto the bed. We made quick, vigorous love, and once we were done, did so a second, and a third time.

When, aching, sore, we finally pulled apart from each other, we stood from the bed and stumbled into the kitchen and out the back door, onto the apartment’s nominal back deck. Night had descended, bringing with it a fresh round of storms. Naked, we stood in the darkness, letting the rain pound down onto us. The pressure in my chest had eased, though it was not gone. It was more as if whatever was inside me had folded its legs and settled into sleep.

If I say that the babies—twins—who resulted from that afternoon occupied my attention for the next dozen years, there’s enough truth to the words for them not to feel like too much of an evasion. What they are is incomplete. After all, there were a good four weeks between Prin’s and my lovemaking and the baby-blue “+” appearing in the window of the home pregnancy test, during which time three more storms thundered through the area. I could have ventured out into any of them, could have tried to return to the spot outside Woodstock where my long-term intuition had seemed to flower into reality. For that matter, once Prin’s pregnancy was confirmed, our hasty marriage accomplished, there were a handful of instances before the twins arrived when I could have resumed my investigation, as there were scattered throughout the years that followed. The most I did, however, was a cursory search of the Web, which revealed that the place where Prin and I had seen whatever we’d seen was proximate to Dutchman’s Creek, which had a vaguely sinister reputation; why, exactly, I couldn’t discover. On a couple of occasions, I broached the topic of that day with Prin, but she met my question of what she thought we’d seen crossing the road with one of her own: “What? What is it you think we saw?” Strictly speaking, it wasn’t a denial of our experience, but it was as if shutters dropped over her eyes, sealing off what might have been happening behind them. It stymied me into silence, which appeared to be the desired effect, since Prin did not continue the conversation.

It was as if the part of me that responded to storms so profoundly had become stuck, the memory of that huge form a gouge in the vinyl, stuttering my emotions. I would sit on the living-room couch, Nina cradled in my right arm, Eddie in my left, as the rain washed the picture window, and the curiously hollow ring of water striking glass would absorb my attention, leaving it too saturated for any further response to the tumult outside. I would half lie on Eddie's bed, my head and shoulders propped against his headboard, his face pressed into my chest, his arms wrapped around me with all his five-year-old's strength, as the air lit white and cracked, and I would stroke his hair, rub his back through his Spider-Man pajamas, telling him as I did so that it was just the weather, keeping my voice calm, level, the steady rise and fall of my words, the slow circles my hand traced on his cotton top, smoothing away any emotions of my own that might have been threatening to bunch up. I would sit on the living-room couch beside Nina as the CBS affiliate out of Albany interrupted our sitcom to discuss the severe weather rampaging across the area, and after leaving my seat to point out to her where Ulster County was on the regional map, I would explain why I didn't think we had to worry about a tornado striking us; although there was one that knocked down the wall of a school south of us, in Newburgh, some years ago—which led to us abandoning the TV to search online for accounts of that old catastrophe, channeling any impulses that had been stirred by the wind's shriek into research. The agitation, the exhilaration I had felt wasn't gone—it wasn't that far away at all. It was… contained, dormant.

What raised it was my children; specifically, their decision to venture out into the woods behind our house on the brink of a storm. I saw the heavy clouds piling overhead; I had read the weather report, which put the entire region under a severe thunderstorm watch; I could already hear the distant thunder, like big trucks bumping over a road. Nonetheless, when Eddie said that he and Nina were going outside to try his new two-way radios, I didn't object. "Don't go too far," I called after him, "it's supposed to rain," but my only answer was the screen door to the porch slapping its frame.

The thunder arrived first, a series of deep growls that rolled over the low hill behind the house. For long moments the air was crowded with sound, and then it was full of rain, the lightning that flickered almost an

afterthought. I sat on the living-room couch, the book I had been reading lowered, and listened for the clump of my children's sneakers on the porch steps, their inevitable giggles at having run home through the downpour. Lightning flashed; the thunder's growl rose to a roar. I left my book open on the couch and hurried to the back door.

Rain hammered the porch. I opened the screen door, and the wind caught it and flung it wide. Leaning out into the storm, I cupped my hands around my mouth and called Nina and Eddie's names. There was no answer. I could picture the two of them crouched beside a tree, grinning like maniacs as they listened to me shouting, an image sufficiently annoying for me to consider leaving them to their sodden fate—an impulse that vanished a moment later, when a bolt of lightning speared the top of the back hill. Thunder boomed, shuddering the house; the rain redoubled. Before I fully knew what I was doing, I was down the porch stairs and running across the yard toward the woods, my bare feet kicking up sprays of cold water. By the time I reached the tree line I was soaked, my hair and clothes plastered to me, my eyes full of rain. Bellowing my children's names, I plunged amongst the trees. Lightning whited the air; thunder shook the tree trunks. Every warning about what to do in a thunderstorm, especially the keeping-away-from-trees part, ran through my head. "Nina!" I shouted. "Eddie!" I dragged my forearm across my eyes, trying to wipe away water with water. Dread coiled deep in my gut, while higher in my chest a sensation of being absolutely overwhelmed threatened to force its way out of me in one long scream.

Strange as it sounds, only after Nina and Eddie had caught my arms and were guiding me toward the house did I realize that the tree I had been standing near had been struck by lightning. When the storm had burst, the twins had sought shelter in the garage, where they'd remained until they'd heard me calling for them. They'd emerged in time to watch me rush into the woods. After a brief deliberation, they'd set off after me. Fifty feet into the trees they stopped, unable to tell which direction I'd gone. Nina was for splitting up and going left and right; Eddie favored staying together and moving forward. Their debate meant that they saw the lightning plunge into the trees somewhere in front of them out of the corners of their eyes. The attendant burst of thunder doubled them over, their hands clapped to their

heads. Ears stunned, they stumbled to the spot where a moderately sized tree had been detonated by the lightning bolt. Chunks of wood, some steaming, a few on fire, fanned out from the trunk's jagged remains. In the midst of the wreckage the twins found me, standing with my eyes wide. Later, Eddie would tell me that he was afraid to touch me, because he was afraid that I might be electrified. No such worry disturbed his sister, who strode up to me, took my right arm, and turned me toward the house.

The worst effects of my experience—the almost-total blanching of my vision, the loss of my hearing—ebbed more quickly than I would have predicted. By the time Prin had returned from shopping and was driving me to the hospital, my vision had largely cleared, though colors still appeared washed-out, and while my hearing was little more than a high-pitched ringing, I was aware of my family's voices as disturbances in that noise. The E.R. doctor pronounced a cautious diagnosis that I was substantially unharmed, which my regular M.D. would second when I saw her the following day, and which she would amend to mild hearing loss when I checked in with her two weeks after that. I wasn't aware of any diminishment in my hearing as much as I was in my vision, specifically my color vision, which remained less vibrant than it had been, as if I were viewing colors through a film. My ongoing complaints led to an appointment with my optometrist, who found nothing obviously wrong with my eyes and referred me to an ophthalmologist, a retinal specialist who spent a long time shining painfully bright lights into my dilated pupils, only to arrive at the same verdict. The specialist offered to send me on to a sub-specialist he knew up in Albany, but I demurred. By that time, I was starting to understand what had happened to me.

Two days before my appointment with the ophthalmologist, I dreamed I was back in the woods, searching for the twins in the midst of the storm. I stumbled into the small clearing where the twins had found me. Evergreens, interrupted by the occasional birch, stationed its border. I screamed my children's names, and as I did so, a finger of lightning touched one of the trees across the clearing. For a dream-moment the lightning hung in place, a blazing seam in the air, a brilliant snarl of glass through which I glimpsed a shape. It was a tree—but such a tree as I'd never seen. Leaves as green as an emerald, as one of those tropical snakes you see in nature documentaries,

gathered into a globe atop a slender trunk whose bark shone like polished bronze. Simultaneously, this was a child's approximation of a tree, and the original tree, the Platonic ideal from which all others emanated. When the lightning was done plunging into the evergreen, the window it had burned into the air closed, a feeling of loss—of grief—as profound as what I'd felt at the death of my father made me suck in my breath as if I'd been kicked. Gasping, I struggled up to consciousness, to Prin asleep in the bed beside me.

For the next week, the image of that tree burned in my mind with such intensity that, had you placed a sample of my neurons under the microscope, you would have seen it lighting the center of each nucleus. Every time I closed my eyes I saw those leaves thick with green, that corrugated bark. I didn't know if what I'd dreamed was an actual memory, retrieved from the trauma surrounding it, or a symbol, a way for my imagination to represent another, indescribable experience to me. I didn't care, because as the vision of that tree glowed in my brain it illuminated the emotion that had accompanied the lightning strike, a terror that was exultation. It was the feeling that had stirred in me a dozen years before, more, while the wipers metronomed across the windshield, the rain jumped on the road ahead. It was the sensation of standing beside a fundamental openness, a Grand Canyon from whose space might emerge anything: an enormous beast, ambling over the blacktop, a tree glimpsed through a flash of lightning. As the huge shape that Prin and I had seen those years ago had seemed to take up residence inside me, tangling itself in this emotion and thus inhibiting it, so the sight of the tree roused the animal, set its nostrils flaring, its tail switching. Pulling my emotion along with it, the thing began to pace the confines of my chest, lowering its blunt head to test the thickness of the wall here, the padlock on the gate there.

Not at once, but over the course of weeks, months, the next couple of years, my actions, my behavior, shifted, became more impulsive, erratic. I noticed it first at work, where I was less inclined to suffer the idiocy of either my co-workers or our customers. At home, the twins entering their teens provided both a prompt and an excuse for me to adopt a more authoritarian style of parenting. In my marriage, I became more vocal about my unhappiness with the long hours Prin put in at her job. And when a storm

blew in, I was much more likely to grab the keys to the truck and announce to whoever was listening that I was going out. If one of the kids, or, more likely, if my wife asked why, I was ready with an excuse about us needing milk; although, on a couple of occasions, I declared that I felt like taking a ride, and since that provoked no further questions, it became my default response.

In nothing I did did I go too far, say words that could not be forgotten, commit acts that could not be forgiven. But in various ways, in all facets of my life, as time passed I drew ever closer to a border to cross over which would bring disaster. At work, my responses to my district manager's suggestions for improving the store verged on outright mockery, while I had given a few dissatisfied customers such a run-around that one of them had been in tears. Within the house I became adept, not at criticizing the twins, but in remaining silent to the little they offered me, treating their adolescently awkward gestures at communication with a bemused condescension. Within my marriage I had stopped complaining to Prin; instead, through the miracle of social media I had located the woman I had been involved with before Prin, and had started emailing, then calling her, late at night, when everyone else was asleep. Whenever lightning strobed the yard, thunder ground against the house, I reached for the keys. Sometimes I would pull the truck into a lay-by and step out into the storm, let the rain needle me, the lightning arc overhead, the thunder shake me. No outsized animals emerged onto the road beside me, no lightning bolts opened views of other places, but I didn't care. Fear so pure it was joy made my blood sing in my ears, made my skin electric, made the animal confined in my chest toss its head and kick its hoofs.

When Prin realized the change in me—which is to say, when she sat down to the computer and saw one of the emails from my ex open on the screen—she attributed it to that cliché of our parents' generation, the midlife crisis. This was during the first conversation we had over the phone, which had to wait a week after I came downstairs to the sight of her suitcase standing at the front door and the sting of her hand slapping my face. Had the twins not already left for their year abroad in Paris, no doubt they, too, would have been packed and waiting in the car. My cheek hot from her blow, all I could do was ask her what was wrong, what had happened. Of course, the instant

my eyes fell on that black case, its rolling-handle extended, the explanation flashed through my brain: *She found out.* As she was stamping out the door, Prin's "Why don't you ask *Joyce* ?" confirmed that she in fact had found out. A check of the computer showed my email account open, the latest semi-flirtatious message from my ex on the screen. It had been forwarded, as had all the others from her, but I deleted them anyway, then logged out of my email, which I was certain I'd done the previous night—though it appeared I'd been mistaken.

That, or I'd been trying to force the moment to its crisis. I wasn't sure. The last few years, I'd largely abandoned the nuances of introspection in favor of the simplicity of action. Yet there had been something almost paradoxically private about my acts; rarely had I considered them in relation to anyone except myself. Mostly, I had luxuriated in the excess of emotion that had given rise to them and to which they, in turn, contributed. Now, left alone, my thoughts turned outward, to Prin, to the marriage that had canted suddenly to one side, its hull torn by the iceberg it had scraped against—the half-submerged danger I had been steering it toward. Back from the job at which I was subdued, distracted, I wandered the empty house, examining my behavior of the last several months—years—with the eye of an investigator attempting to reconstruct the precise sequence of events that had led to the jagged ice piercing the steel plates, the ocean's cold water pouring through the gap. I could identify a lengthy report's worth of instances, large and small, when Prin and I had been out of sync with each other, but I could not assemble those moments into a coherent and adequate narrative, one that explained not just my ongoing, secret communication with my ex, but my withdrawal from my children, my belligerence at work. There was only the great animal baying inside me, a torrent of emotion.

For the first time since I'd run out after the twins, however, that terrible awe was challenged by another feeling, by a fear more prosaic in its origins, but no less potent in its effects. Prin, Nina and Eddie, even my job: all had come to seem incidental to my life, barely connected to its actual substance, to the fabulous tree burning in my memory. As if a lens had dropped in front of my eyes, I saw my wife, my children, my work, not as ornaments, but as the girders and beams giving my days what shape and order they had.

To be the inhabitant of such a structure seemed the remarkable thing, the momentary tree and huge silhouette typical of a world that tended to formlessness and chaos. With my actions I had steadily undermined the base of that construction, to the point that it was swaying perilously. How near to collapse my life was, I couldn't estimate with much accuracy, but it was certainly close enough for me to be overtaken by crushing sadness at the prospect of its fall. I was afraid, not of the sublime unknown, but for the domestic familiar, and the emotion transfixed me like a pin through an insect.

So absorbed was I by what appeared the imminent and inevitable end of my life as I had known it, that I barely registered the approach of Hurricane Eileen. Prior to Prin's discovery of my correspondence with my ex, I had watched the reports of the storm sweeping the northwest edge of the Caribbean, on path to make landfall somewhere between mid-Florida and northern Georgia, its course after that likely a coastal one, though the specifics would have to wait until the storm drew nearer. I heard the cashiers talking about the hurricane in the break room, directed customers to the bottled water, the propane tanks, the portable generators, agreed with my assistant manager's suggestion that we try to scare up some more portable jennies from the warehouse, but none of it registered as it would have only days before. I was absorbed by the fact that four days had passed since Prin's departure, and there was still no reply from her to any of the emails I'd sent, one a day. I wasn't sure if she'd headed to her parents, who were close but would require some measure of explanation, or to one of her friends, or to a motel. There'd been no word from the twins either, which was probably due to late-adolescent obliviousness, but which I was afraid signified that Prin had contacted them already.

Not until the end of my long conversation with Prin a week after she'd left, when she asked me if I were prepared for Eileen, did it dawn on me that this storm might be a cause for concern. A search online turned up articles about the mandatory evacuations of low-lying areas of New York City, the extra utility workers placed on standby, the state of emergency that had been declared for the area. Another click of the mouse brought me a satellite photo of the hurricane itself, a vast comma of thick, gray clouds whose margins reached from Virginia to Massachusetts. Rendered in the National

Weather Service's color-coded pixels, Eileen was a wall of deep green sweeping around bands of yellow and orange, all arcing in front of the well-defined blank of the eye. Downgraded from a Category 2 to a Category 1 hurricane, the storm was still considered a serious threat to the City. Already, the first wave of showers was washing into the region, the winds were rising, the TV stations throughout the region had deployed whatever reporters had drawn the short straws to the locations that had been deemed suitably photogenic—the majority of which appeared to be located on or near the beach. Outside my window, the weather was quiet. I considered a run to Walmart to pick up a few supplies, only to reject the idea as so much media-inspired hysteria. Likely, the storm would either skirt the City or miss it entirely, leaving me with a portable propane stove I could have bought for half the price using my employee discount at work. Anyway, I was preoccupied with my talk with Prin, the upshot of which was that, while far from happy, she accepted my assurance that my email exchanges with my ex had not led to any other kinds of exchanges, and was willing to consider continuing our marriage. At least for the moment, our life together was not going to come crashing down, though how much repair would be required remained to be seen.

When I woke late the next morning, it was to wind moaning over the house, rain tapping on the bedroom windows. My prediction had been correct: the hurricane had missed the City. Instead, Eileen had swung inland, rolling over northern New Jersey and eastern Pennsylvania, losing strength as it went, until, by the time it reached the Hudson Valley, it had been demoted to a tropical storm. The difference, however, was academic, since even as a tropical storm Eileen stirred the air into gusts that pushed against the house in long shrieks, drove the rain horizontally. Lightning stammered, an engine trying to catch, while thunder rumbled like the edges of continents scraping against one another. The cable was out, which was no surprise, but the power was on, which I wouldn't have expected. I found the transistor radio Prin had bought me last Christmas, slid out the antenna, and turned it on. Everything was already closed or closing. Whoever was responsible for such things had prohibited all non-essential travel. The storm had stalled overhead. Widespread power outages had been reported and more were anticipated; high wind advisories, flash-flood warnings, and

tornado watches had been issued. Our house sat on a low ridge, paralleled by other ridges, so I wasn't worried about much except maybe one of the trees in the front yard falling into it—though none stood tall enough to threaten more than a prolonged inconvenience. Prin's parents' house, however—to which she had retreated—was separated from the Hudson by a modest lawn that terminated in a short slope to a narrow and rocky beach. On top of everything else, Eileen was supposed to draw the Hudson up beyond flood stage. I wasn't sure what the implications of this were for my in-laws' place, but it was a matter for concern. Our telephone was tied to our cable, though, as was our Internet access, and since Prin had taken the emergency cellphone with her, there was no way for me to contact her. I toyed with the idea of running out to the truck and navigating the deluge to Prin's parents', but couldn't decide how much peril my wife was actually in. With the slope of the lawn, her mom and dad's house was up maybe seven or eight feet from the river. Was that high enough? Not to mention, how would it look when I was pulled over for being on the road in the storm, as I probably would be?

There was nothing to do except to remain where I was and wait out the storm. On the kitchen table, there were stacks of paperwork I had been ignoring for a couple of weeks before Prin had left: sales figures, projections, and goals; a rundown of the coming season's new products, with suggestions on how best to promote them; three in-house applications for the assistant manager position that had recently opened, and another thirty-five applications for the single part-time job we'd advertised. It was the kind of work I daily found it more difficult to undertake, but which, given my need to fill the next several hours with some type of activity, was not without its use. I set up the coffeemaker, switched it on, and dug a set of candles and a box of matches out of the junk drawer while the kitchen filled with the sharp odor of hot coffee. Then I settled down at the table and set to work.

Of course I wanted to be outside, letting the storm envelop me. Before I had processed the sounds to which I'd awakened, the beast in my chest had known them for what they were and been pawing the ground, pressing its thick shoulder against the wall surrounding it. Over the years the tail ends of a few hurricanes had struck the area glancing blows on their way out to

sea, but as far as I could remember, Eileen was the first storm of this magnitude to line us up in its sights like this. The house shifted and shuddered with the thunder; the bushes in the front yard cringed at the rain beating down on them; the woods behind the house creaked and cracked as the wind pushed them back and forth. The shrill, electric trill of the Emergency Broadcast System spilled from the transistor radio, and a woman's voice, sounding oddly muffled, announced that a tornado had been spotted on the other side of Wiltwyck, maybe ten miles away. As the voice went on warning about the dangers of a tornado and advising the best spots in a house for sheltering from one, the tips of my fingers, my toes, tingled, my cheeks flushed, and what felt like a space high in my skull opened. When I stood to take a break, I crossed to the kitchen windows and pressed one hand to each. Outside, Eileen was hurling itself against everything, was scouring the very air, wearing it thinner, bringing that other place, the home of the huge silhouette, the astonishing tree, nearer. It was close; I was aware of it at the edge of the space in my head, like something you know you have forgotten, a gap whose outlines you can almost picture. If I threw open the porch door and dashed out into the rain, into the woods, might I not find it? Might I not pass into it? I went so far as to unlock the back door and walk out onto the porch. A gust of wind made me stagger, while the rain drilled my arms, my neck, my head. Lightning filled the air in brilliant sheets; thunder shivered the porch under my feet. Terror as pure and pitiless as a bird of prey, as an eagle plucking a fish out of the water, gripped me. Here I was, on the verge. Already my hair was soaked, my shirt and jeans drenched. How easy it would be to go the rest of the way into the storm, to let my fear carry me into it.

I couldn't say what returned me inside. One moment I was leaning on the porch railing, squinting through the rain at the woods; the next, I had shut and locked the back door and was making my soggy way to the bathroom, where I pulled off my wet clothes and stepped into a hot shower. The terror that had seized me had not relaxed its hold; I could still sense the other place immanent in the air. The thing in my chest bellowed, ramming its head against its prison. But I stood letting the hot water chase the rain's chill from my skin, and when the water began to lose its heat I turned it off, toweled dry, and went in search of fresh clothes. Once I'd dug another pair

of jeans and long-sleeved T-shirt out of my dresser, I made myself an early lunch and ate it while I resumed my paperwork. At any time I could have left the house for the storm. I didn't. It was as if—the very extremity of the emotion raging through me made it feel suddenly unreal. In comparison, the kitchen table at which I was seated, its top scuffed and scored from years of the twins' employing it as a workbench for school projects, felt solid, as much as the countertop behind me, which bore the scars of all the fruit, the vegetables, the loaves of bread I'd sliced through without using the cutting board. The refrigerator whose freezer tended to ice up, so that it required defrosting at least twice a year; the electric oven that cooked too hot and that we'd been threatening to replace with a gas range for as long as we'd lived here; the coffeemaker whose red CLEAN light blinked no matter how recently we'd cleaned it: none of these things, or any of the others filling the house, was as vivid as the tree I'd glimpsed through the lightning—but they seemed present in a manner I hadn't recognized before, and that was somehow sufficient to keep me working at the table.

By early afternoon, Eileen was starting to ebb. By mid-afternoon the rain had diminished to a light shower. By late afternoon the storm had slid to the north and east, Vermont and a corner of Massachusetts. I was congratulating myself for not having lost power when the lights went out. Exasperating, yes, but in a way that I could tell would become funny when I related the event to friends—to Prin. Prin—without warning, I wanted nothing else than to see my wife, to gather her into my arms, to take her someplace, a hotel, a bed-and-breakfast, a motel on the edge of a highway, where we could be alone. I could not think of anything that was more important than this. I checked to be certain I hadn't left anything on that I shouldn't have—I hadn't, but she would ask, and I wanted to be able to say I'd looked—grabbed the keys to the truck, and locked the door behind me.

From the radio, I knew that 213, the route I usually took to my in-laws, was flooded. If I hadn't heard it on the news, I would have expected it: there was a stream that flowed right under the road about a mile toward Wiltwyck, and I imagined it would have submerged, if not carried away, the road there. What the news hadn't reported, and I hadn't anticipated, was that the road would be closed about a half-mile in the other direction, toward Huguenot, where the picturesque waterfall that descended from the

hillside to the left had become a roaring Niagara. It had undermined the road it typically trickled below to the extent that the road's collapse was judged imminent, and the police had blocked it off already with sawhorses and barrels. I might have risked walking or running, across it, but the truck was far too heavy for any such adventuring. It appeared the only way to my in-laws would be to navigate the back roads that wound through the hills and mountains between here and the Hudson. While this wasn't something I did on a daily basis, I was reasonably sure I could manage it. When the twins had been infants, the one guaranteed way to put them to sleep at the same time had been to strap them into their car seats and take them for a ride. As a result, I'd traveled the majority of roads between Huguenot and Wiltwyck, so, although Prin had the GPS in her car, I wasn't too concerned about being able to find my way. I turned the truck around and drove back to where one of the side roads intersected it at the bottom of a steep rise. I powered up the slope and set off to join my wife.

As the crow flies, it was three and half, four miles from our front door to Prin's parents. Probably that distance doubled if you had to traverse it by car. And if the roads that vehicle was following had just been swept by a tropical storm, that seven or eight miles doubled, maybe tripled. The roads in here were narrow, with no shoulder, and bordered by more streams, swamps, and ponds than I'd realized, all of which had swollen and spilled their confines with the season's worth of rain that the last fourteen hours had brought. Water lapped the edges of the road in some places; in others, it slid across in a glassy sheet; in still others, it covered the road in a new lake. After six, I lost count of the number of times I shifted into reverse for another three-point turn. One road was blocked by a massive tree that had fallen across it; another was fenced by power lines, one of whose poles had tilted toward the road; a third had mostly disappeared under the hillside that had dissolved onto it. To either side, I saw houses damaged. Here was a raised ranch whose living-room window had been stove in by the tree that had toppled through it. Here was a split-level built on a hill, its foundation laid bare by the rain. Here was a cape, an island in the center of a broad lake whose surface was ruffled by the wind.

When I drove across the black water, I thought I knew where I was. After almost reaching 9W, the major north-south route along the Hudson's

western shore—which was not, as far as I could tell from the radio's updates, closed—a new stream galloping over the road had forced me to turn around. Feeling as if I were confined in a gigantic maze, I backtracked almost to my starting point for yet another try at the puzzle. It was not yet dark, but the sky was losing its light. On the right, a road t-junctioned the one I was driving. I'd noticed it on the way out, but had ignored it because I'd thought it joined another side road that emptied onto 213 this side of the flooding. Approaching it from this direction, however, I thought I remembered that this road in fact looped in the other direction, intersecting another side road that would bring me to 9W. It was worth a try, so I turned onto it.

Right away I saw the water flowing across the road ahead, maybe a hundred yards distant. I knew enough to be aware of the danger of fording a flooded road, especially when the water covering it was moving; if I hadn't, there were warnings against doing so every ten minutes on the radio. Had I taken this road at the beginning of my journey, I would have reversed immediately. This far into it, however, with my options for reaching my wife dwindled almost to zero, I let the truck roll forward. The water didn't look that deep. Its blackness was not a trick of the light, nor was the water full of dirt. It was more as if it had been dyed black. The color didn't concern me: I assumed it must be due to some kind of microorganism that had been fomented by the rain. I eased the truck into it, unable to recall whether the road dipped here or not. The water eddied around the tires, rising up them as I continued. What was the minimum depth at which moving water could sweep your vehicle off the road? Was it different for a truck? I was approximately halfway across the stream, and the water seemed to have halted its climb at the bottom of my tires' hubcaps. I glanced to my left, where the water was spreading out in a broad pool over the small meadow there. If I were to be carried off the road, I was reasonably sure I'd be able to four-wheel my way out of it, and if not, I could abandon the truck and wade for it. It would be messy, and slow, and ultimately costly, and it would mean having to return to the house, but it wasn't anything I couldn't handle.

And then I was on the other side of the water, pressing the gas pedal to make up for lost time. For the next mile or so the road ran straight, its edges

lipped by more black water pooling in the fields and forest alongside it. Where the remnant of a stone wall crossed the woods on either side, the road swung sharply to the right before almost doubling back to the left. I didn't remember this, but after all, it would have been fifteen, sixteen years since I'd last driven here, and anyway, that wasn't important. Standing amongst the trees on my right was the tree I'd glimpsed behind my house four years before.

Everything went far away, and it was as if I were seeing the tree at the end of long, dark tunnel. My head swam. Without thinking I stepped on the brake, so that only the front right wheel left the road. The truck slowed to a crawl. Black spots dancing in front of my eyes; I brought the truck to a complete stop, shifted into park, and opened my door. The engine running, I stepped out of the truck. The ground here was slightly raised. I started to walk toward the tree. There was no water for me to trek through, though I wouldn't have cared—I doubt I would have noticed. All my attention was focused on the tree, which I was certain was going to vanish any second now.

It did not. My fingers brushed its bark, which was rough, fibrous, like that of the cedar in my front yard. It was warm, the way wood is at the end of a long day in the hot sun. Its surface shone with a dull, yellowed light, as if it were reflecting a brightness invisible to me. The faint odor of citrus, of oranges on the turn, hung around it. Overhead, leaves green as jade gathered in a heavy crown. I reached up my hand to one of them, only to snatch it back with a hiss. The edges of the leaves were serrated, and those teeth as sharp as fishhooks, a fact to which the beads of blood welling from my fingertips testified. Wincing, I shook my hand and saw the other trees.

There were five of them, mixed in with the oaks and maples. Each was slightly different from its fellows, the trunk thicker here, the leaves higher there, but the bronze bark, the sea-green leaves, marked them as the same species. Almost before I was aware of it, I was half running toward them, my uninjured hand held out to them. Their bark was full of the same heat as the first one I'd touched; I didn't need to touch their leaves to notice their sharpness. From tree to tree, I moved steadily deeper into the woods, farther away from the truck, whose engine sounded more distant than the hundred or so yards I'd walked. Beyond the last tree, there was a small clearing of

reddish ground, across which a grove of the trees stood. Somewhere deep within that grove, something was visible through the shining trunks. I was not afraid: at the sight of that first tree, my emotions had leapt over fear to wonder. As I took in each successive revelation, so did that wonder push toward joy. By the time I crossed the clearing, I was grinning.

Amongst the trees, the smell of citrus hung heavier. The air was warm, the post-storm chill chased from it by the heat radiating from the trees. The low rumble of the truck's engine had been occluded by another sound, a rushing like wind through the leaves, which was punctuated by an irregular boom. It seemed to be coming from the other side of the white objects in whose direction I was heading. There were several of them, standing straight and pale; they appeared to be another kind of tree, a grove within the grove. Their trunks were smooth, creamy; as with the trees surrounding them, these swept up to crowns I wasn't close enough to distinguish, but which appeared joined to one another. Only when I arrived at the edge of the space in which these white trees had been planted did I realize that they were not, in fact, trees, but columns. Perhaps a dozen, fifteen of them had been set in a wide ring, which had been roofed by the small dome they supported—which had partially collapsed on my side. The columns, the roof, seemed to be marble or a stone like it. The ground around the temple—that was immediately how I thought of it—was bare, only a couple of stray leaves marking it. So far as I could see, there was no writing, no marking, on the structure's exterior.

Tears streamed down my cheeks. The scent of oranges, the sound of rushing, surrounded me. My nerves hummed. Anything might happen here. Conscious of its damaged roof, I approached the temple cautiously. A heap of broken stone lay on the floor under the gap. Passing between a pair of columns, I saw that the rubble partially obscured the mosaic that took up the floor. Executed in the flat style of a Byzantine icon, the image showed the head and shoulders of a woman whose brown ringlets spread down over the top of her peach robe. Most of her face was hidden by the fallen stone, which had also cracked and loosened dozens of the thumbnail-sized tiles, but one wide, brown eye was visible. I knelt beside it, placing my palm on the iris. The tiles were cool, the seams among them imperceptible. I picked up one of the roof fragments. Though the size of a quarter, it was far

heavier. I weighed it in my hand, listening to the rushing noise, which sounded not so much louder as clearer here, enough that I could identify it as the surf, throwing itself up the beach and receding, the occasional boom a collapsing wave. Between the columns opposite me, I could see out to where the ground lifted in a gradual swell. From the other side of it the ocean sounded. I stood, fresh tears pouring from my eyes, and as I did so, saw a shape moving over the rise.

It was an animal, crossing from right to left. It was enormous, its front shoulder a rounded mountain that dipped to a long back, which rose again at the hips. It paused and swung its head in my direction, bringing a pair of widely set horns into relief. It raised its snout and, with the whuff of a bellows inflating, inhaled. It did so a second time, and I realized it was sniffing the air. It dropped its head and turned toward me. As it climbed the hill, I saw that it was a bull—but such a bull as might have stepped straight from an ancient myth. It wasn't only that it was far larger than any bull I had ever seen by a factor of two or three. Its skin shone the red-gold of the sun sliding toward the horizon; its horns were white as sea-foam. Its features were finely, even delicately formed, to the point that this animal could have served as the example of the species in all its varieties. Were it not for the great iron ring looped through its nostrils, I easily could have believed I was beholding a god who had elected to put on this form for his latest sojourn on earth. As it was, I was half tempted to drop to my knees at the sight of it standing atop the rise, its presence there like the shout of a full orchestra. It threw its head back and bellowed, a deep, rolling roar that made the leaves on the trees shudder. I took a step backwards. The bull lowered its head, snorted, and pawed the ground. There was no need to wait for its charge; pivoting on my right foot, I sprinted out of the temple the way I'd come.

From this direction the edge of the grove seemed to take much longer to reach. Already too close behind me, the bull was a wave of sound, rushing to overtake me. A glance over my shoulder showed it swerving from side to side as it sought gaps among the trees wide enough to allow its horns. Had its path to me been clear, the bull would have run me down in no time. As it was, I wasn't wild about my chances. My days of running high-school track were a quarter-century gone. If I could reach my truck, the odds would

improve in my favor. But between the thunder of the bull's hooves on the ground and the pounding of the blood in my ears, I had yet to hear the rumble of the engine—and that was assuming it hadn't stalled. The bull roared, and adrenaline fired my legs, carrying me out of the grove into the forest proper. To my left, my right, the scattering of the shining trees that had drawn me deeper into the woods flashed past. The ground here was slicker, slippery with storm-soaked leaves, treacherous with fallen branches, a couple of toppled trees. I hurdled a trunk thick with moss, slid under another whose collapse had been arrested by one of its companions. The first tree I had seen was ahead. Not too far beyond it, my truck appeared to be running. With a pair of titanic cracks, the bull struck and shattered the trees I had dodged over and under. I cleared the tree line. The truck was forty yards away, thirty-five. The bull's hooves pounded the earth. The truck was thirty yards away, twenty-five. The bull snorted like a steam engine. The truck was twenty yards away, fifteen. I could hear the engine's roll. The ground drummed under my feet; the bull was nearly on me. The truck was ten yards away, five. I could see the dome light on because I hadn't closed my door completely. The bull was burning behind me.

I cleared the hood, threw myself to the left, hauled open the driver's side door, and flung myself into the cab. Before I had pulled the door shut, the bull struck the right side of the flatbed with a shuddering boom. The truck swung hard to the left, the door snapping open and jerking me half out of the cab. Only a little of its momentum lost, the bull continued past, its hooves sparking on the road as it charged into the marsh on the other side, spraying water and mud as it went. Though slowed by the change in terrain, the bull did not stop, but wheeled to the left, commencing an arc that would return it to me in no time. Grateful to be on dry ground, I closed the door, shifted into reverse, and stepped on the gas. For a heart-stopping moment, the wheels spun, then they caught and the truck lurched backwards, flinging me forward with such force I smacked my head on the steering wheel. I stomped the brake in time to avoid plunging into the marsh, shifted into drive, and dragged the wheel to the left. The tires shrieked as the truck lurched around in the direction I'd come. I straightened the wheel and pressed the gas to the floor. To my right, the bull had adjusted its course and was on path to intercept me. Never the greatest when it came to quick starts,

the truck gathered speed. The bull was churning up gouts of water and weeds as it went, dulling its hide with mud. I held the gas all the way down. The bull stumbled—my heart jumped—and caught itself. Just beyond where the bull was on course to hit me, the road turned sharply to the right, almost doubling back on itself. If I took that curve too fast, the truck would flip, and I wouldn't have to worry about unearthly bulls. If I didn't keep the accelerator to the floor, though, the question of the curve would remain theoretical. The bull was practically galloping through the marsh. Even seated in the cab, I found it gigantic. The truck hurtled over the road. Fast enough—I was just about going fast enough. The bull's head, its great horns, loomed in the passenger's side window. An eye the size of a saucer regarded me with an emotion I couldn't identify.

For a second time, the bull hit the truck on the right side of the flatbed. There was a boom, the scream of tearing metal, the brass shout of the huge beast. The truck fishtailed left; braking, I overcompensated to the right and sent the rear end fishtailing that way. As the scene in the rearview mirror whipped back and forth, I glimpsed the bull plunging through the trees, shaking its head. It didn't appear to be turning as quickly as it had before, but I was too busy trying to bring my vehicle under control to do any more than note the difference. I succeeded in gaining command of the truck as the road bent into its acute angle, and while there was a second I felt the left-hand tires threatening to leave the asphalt, the truck remained upright. Fully expecting to witness the bull charging across the marsh after me, I looked to the right, to see it standing on the forest side of the road, watching me as I sped away. When I came to the black water still flowing across the road, I did not slow down.

Although I had no desire to return home, which seemed agonizingly close to where the bull had burst forth, I could not think of another route to Prin's parents, so home I drove. Once I'd parked the truck, I intended to sprint to the back of the house, where I'd use the basement door to let myself inside. I wasn't sure whether it would be better to shelter from the bull—which I was certain was making its way toward me—in the basement, or if I should choose the first floor, from which I could dash to the truck, if need be. However, when I stepped down from the cab, muscles tensing for the run to the house, something on the flatbed caught my eye. A quick survey showed

the bull was not, as yet, near, so I hurried around the back of the truck. From just behind the passenger's door to the very end of the flatbed, the right side of my truck was crumpled and creased, the metal dented in half a dozen places, the liner cracked and pushed part of the way out. Between the rear wheel and the tailgate, a deep gouge ended in a jagged hole the width of my hand. Lodged inside that hole, jutting into the flatbed, was the object that had drawn my notice, a point of white horn a foot long, its tip undulled, its base rough from having been snapped off. Leaning over into the flatbed, I worked to free the horn. Except for a groove that had been cut into it by a metal shard, its surface was smooth, cool. It came loose without too much effort on my part and was surprisingly light in my hand. Holding the piece of horn, I felt the panic that had spurred me home relax its grip—but I walked to the house quickly.

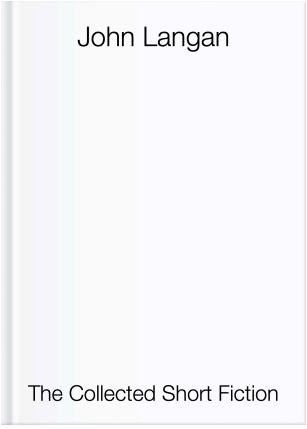
Inside, the house was dim, the power not yet returned. I lit one of the candles I'd left on the kitchen table and used it to light my way upstairs to the second floor and the undersized room that served as my home office. There, I slid out the lower of my desk's drawers, in whose depths I stored those things I planned to find a more permanent home for later. I placed the fragment of horn in there, along with the oddly heavy piece of rock I'd picked up in the temple, and which at some point thereafter I'd dropped into the front pocket of my jeans. I closed the drawer, shut the office door behind me, and descended the stairs. I didn't enter that room again for weeks, didn't say anything about what was in my desk drawer or where it had come from to Prin or her parents, when they pulled into the driveway the next day, or to the twins, when they returned home for Christmas vacation. The damage to the truck I blamed on an accident I claimed to have suffered while trying to reach Prin's parents' during the height of the hurricane. I had driven, I said, into a flooded section of road, only to find the water deeper and stronger than I'd anticipated. The truck had been swept off the road into a stand of trees, and it was only through some miracle that I had been able to engage the four-wheel-drive and escape. My story was helped by the large bruise that purpled my forehead where I'd smacked it on the steering wheel, though my father-in-law was visibly unsatisfied with my explanation. The insurance company wasn't any happier about my claim, which they first denied, then, when I proposed

legal action, refused to cover fully, citing the role of my reckless behavior in causing the damage. I took what I could get and the next year traded in the truck for a small station wagon.

After arriving with her parents, Prin remained with me, as, over the next couple of weeks, she decided to remain in our marriage. I ceased contact with my ex, deleting the account from which I'd written to her. About ten days after the storm, I drove the road along which I'd sighted the shining tree; it ran straight and short, intersecting another after a few hundred yards. The twins returned from their study abroad for their senior year of high school and plans to leave, again, for college. I did not leave my job; nor, when the next storm slid over us, did I do anything other than check that the windows were shut.

With each and every storm that followed, I have, when possible, done exactly the same thing: ensure that the windows are closed and mount the stairs to the second floor and my office. There I sit at my desk, which faces the window that looks over the backyard. I watch the rain bead the window, the wind toss the trees. I squint at the lightning's flare, listen to the thunder rattle the window. I try not to picture the face I saw on the temple floor, the single eye gazing up impassively. I try not to think about that other place, the grove in which I walked, the ocean whose waves I heard, lying on the other side of a veil as fine as a spider web, as wide as the world. I try not to indulge the emotion that roils through me, that has continued to answer the summons of every storm. At some point I will have retrieved the length of horn, the piece of stone, from the drawer and set them on the desk. My hands on either side of them, I gaze out the window and remind myself how much I love my family.

With Max Barry in the Nearer Precincts



”As with all journeys we assume a final destination, and thus we arrive at such: the last story in this book. I selected this piece as “the closer” as it is the longest and most ambitious tale I acquired for my anthology. In addition, this story perhaps leaves the strongest lasting impression, a good sentiment to retain, once you close the final page. The brilliant John Langan creates an entire mythos, a rich history and alternate suggestion to the traditional view of Heaven as our hereafter. The world and characters and conflict he creates are impressive, and I only hope that someday this may be expanded into additional stories or even novels. For now, pay heed as we go forth *With Max Barry in the Nearer Precincts*. If only we all could be so prepared with the answers of what to expect once our time on Earth is concluded.“—Introduction to the story in *After Death…* (April 2013)

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None of us should have been surprised: if anyone could have been expected to find his way back, it was Max Barry. Hadn’t he spent the last three-quarters of a century investigating the murky terrain just the other side of this life? Hadn’t one of the three of us accompanied him for the last two decades, as he roamed the country searching out and interviewing those who had ventured the margins of existence? Hadn’t we entered those accounts into Barry’s massive archive (properly cross-referenced, of course) and helped him coordinate the information he retrieved, to arrange it into practically a map of the undiscovered country’s nearer precincts? With almost the final breath his failing lungs could muster, Barry promised us at least a sign—not so original a pledge, perhaps, but one weighted by the accumulated years of his research.

And yet, when myself, Torres, and Schaefer were the recipients of not just a sign, but the presence of the man, himself, our combined reactions might

have been lifted from the most formulaic horror film. We had gathered around the oak table in the study as we did every Thursday evening. With Barry a fortnight in the family mausoleum behind the house, there was little reason for the three of us to be there, for while we had been more than diligent in the work we performed for him, the quality of our efforts owed itself less to any shared passion for the subject and more to the generous paychecks he signed every other week—that, and the force of his personality, which had the effect of a powerful magnet on a scattering of iron filings, snapping them into alignment with itself. While his will appointed us trustees of his estate at salaries every bit as comfortable as those we had drawn as his assistants, and while that document allowed and encouraged us to use a substantial portion of the Barry fortune to extend his research, absent Max's presence, the offer held scant interest for us.

Although we had spent the first meeting after his death in reminiscences of Max, and half the second in gossip, we continued to gather in the study with its thick green carpet and heavy black curtains from an obscure sense of loyalty, a desire not to allow the project of a man's life to end mid-sentence, but to bring the paragraph to a full and complete stop. We hadn't any notion how this was to be done, whether the archive, for example, might find a home at a sympathetic university; or whether one or the other of us might write the account of our experiences in Barry's employ; or even whether we might hire a new, younger group to continue the task of exploring the other side by proxy—but I believe we felt that, if we carried on our meetings, eventually, the solution to our dilemma would present itself.

There were two empty chairs at the table that night: the one usually occupied by Barry and the one which frequently went unoccupied but occasionally sat a guest Barry had invited. It was in this second, typically-vacant chair that Max Barry suddenly sat.

If I were to attempt to justify the screams that erupted from Torres, Schaefer's string of oaths, my start up from my seat, it would be through an appeal to Barry's appearance. Anyone who has been in the presence of a corpse knows the fundamental *difference* of the dead, their utter stillness, the lack of barely-perceptible motions through which life percolates out of us. Although it wore his favorite black suit, white shirt, and black tie, the figure that sat in our midst was as motionless as it had been in its coffin.

Because of its slackness, the face was at first unrecognizable to me; it was the work of some seconds to identify the large, round nose, the long forehead, the lips that always seemed too thin for the wide mouth. Had the eyes been open, I might have fitted the pieces of the puzzle more quickly, but they were—and remained throughout his visitation—closed.

Once I assembled its components into Barry's large, plain face, however, and understood who it was beside me, a rush of pure terror caused me to shove my chair back and retreat to the couch, which I almost fell over. Torres found her voice before the rest of us. "Max—Mr. Barry?"

The figure's mouth dropped open like that of a ventriloquist's dummy. The voice that issued from it was unmistakably Barry's broad, pleasant one, but it sounded off, as if it had been poorly-recorded, then played on a stereo with a shorted speaker. "Ms. Torres," it said. "Mr. Schaefer. Mr. Anderson."

"Mr. Barry," Schaefer and I said.

"You've returned," Torres said.

"Yes," the figure said. "Did I not say I would?"

Torres stuttered an answer. The figure—Barry—said, "It is all right, Ms. Torres. You were right to be skeptical. It has ever been your role in our little group."

"How are you?" Schaefer said.

"I still *am* , Mr. Schaefer. What about you, Mr. Anderson? Do you have no words for your old employer?"

The note of familiarity in that strange voice made my bowels clench. My mouth was dry. I licked my lips and said, "What can you tell us?"

"Very good," Barry said. "Very good. I am not sure how much time I will have with you, so I'll try to be direct. From the beginning, then—or the end:

The passage was about what we had anticipated. As my vision grew dark at the edges, it brightened at the center. From a point, the brightness swelled to a circle, which opened into a tunnel. I rose out of my body toward it. The process was as easy as the reports led me to expect. If I had to compare it to anything, it would be to swimming, to pulling your arms and kicking your feet and feeling the water move around you. My astral body was a fairly exact copy of my corporeal form, with the exception that its senses

appeared sharper for the transition. That, and I wore, not my hospital gown, but my suit. The sensation—the white tunnel seemed to be tugging me to it as much as I was floating to meet it. I looked down and saw the three of you around my bed, the doctor turning away. I saw my body, the final breath leaving it. I felt more buoyant. Ahead, the white tunnel reached to an end incredibly distant and blindingly brilliant, the heart of a star. The nearer I drew to the opening, the stronger its pull became.

I had the impression that, were I to exert myself, I might resist the tunnel's attraction. There was some interest to me in this. Having investigated so many reports of ghosts, what an opportunity to assume the role, myself. This temptation paled, however, in comparison to that of venturing the white tunnel. Now I could see figures within it, detaching themselves from the wall. There were three of them. Each appeared dressed in white robes. Their faces were too far away to distinguish yet, together, they produced a feeling of profound calm, almost familiarity. I thought they might be members of my family, come to welcome me to the next stage, my mother and father, perhaps, one of my sisters. I gave myself up to the tunnel.

There was the impression of traveling without movement. Whiteness sped by; otherwise, I might have been standing still. The trio of white forms swept around me. Their faces were no clearer; each remained a bright blur. I saw that what I had taken for their robes was in fact their substance. They brushed against me, and the calm this produced was almost soporific—even hypnotic. Ahead, the tunnel's brilliant destination was larger, closer. It seemed I could glimpse something beyond that opening, a landscape of rolling hills through which wound a shining river. Beyond the hills, a city like an arrangement of great white crystals rose into a blue sky.

On all sides, the white trio pressed against me. Despite the tranquility they radiated and the impression of familiarity, I was uneasy; indeed, it was that overwhelming calm that disturbed me. Rather than the Heavenly peace I at first took it for, it verged on the anesthetic. Through the blur, I perceived one of the trio's faces, and it was empty, as an open mouth is empty. I was more shocked by this than made afraid, but a profound fear gripped me when I concentrated on the end of the tunnel—nearer and brighter still—and saw, not the slopes of paradise, but a vast, shining emptiness. Dulled as my senses had become, I felt what lay at the terminus of the white tunnel

was alive, a living void. It was hungry, primordially so, and it was that appetite that drew me up from my failing body along the white tunnel. I had a vision of an aardvark searching for ants. This was not the God-as-blank of negative theology; it was the open maw of the Behemoth.

Although wrapped in lethargy, I knew at once I must escape my escorts. This was no easy task. The closer we approached that great mouth, the more the white figures crowded me. One kept directly in front, the other two behind and to either side. There was no time. Summoning what little energy remained, I threw myself to the left. One of the figures behind grabbed me, but surprise gave me the advantage and I pulled free. The wall of the white tunnel rushed toward me. I struck and plunged into it—I would compare the sensation to diving into a pool or lake, except the medium that enveloped me was thicker than water, more viscous, though not so much as to immobilize me. Brightness blinded me. Kicking and pushing, I struggled through the material of the tunnel wall. For a long moment, that I might remain trapped in this place seemed an awful possibility, a fate only slightly less worse than being swallowed by that enormous gullet. The medium thickened around me, my movement became difficult. Frantic, I pushed forward. In response, the wall stretched. Mustering my strength, I pressed against it a second time. At the tips of my fingers, I felt the substance part.

All at once, I was free, tumbling through darkness. Behind me was a brilliant glare, a river of light filling the near horizon, flowing out of the distance, into the distance. Beyond it, I could discern other, similar streams, as I could when I turned my attention to what lay before me. From their appearance—narrow brooks in comparison with the flood next to me—I guessed each must lay at a considerable remove from its fellows. As I slowed, I perceived more of the lines of light, so that the entire—I suppose I should call it the sky—above me resembled a tremendous net.

Pieces of the white trio had adhered to my arms, my chest. When I tried to work my fingers under one of them, my eyes filled with the sight of the celestial landscape I had thought I’d seen at the end of the white tunnel. Nausea climbed my throat. In a kind of frenzy, I ripped and tore at the fragments attached to me, flinging each a different direction once it was loose.

Somewhat more calm, I decided I must move. While the white trio had not appeared in pursuit, I was reluctant to venture any direction that would bring me too close to the blazing tunnels. This precluded all courses save one, down, into the darkness below. In the collective glow of the tunnels, I picked out dim, shadowy forms an uncertain distance away. The nearest of them did not appear unduly far. By kicking my legs, pulling my arms—in effect, "swimming" as I had in the tunnel wall—I was able to propel myself toward it.

I descended I am not certain how much, but when I looked up, the tunnel I escaped was a good three-quarters diminished in width, from river to stream. Sufficient light remained for me to distinguish that the nearest shadowy form I sought was actually a structure.

It was a staircase, rising from the deeper dark. The top three or four steps were jagged, incomplete, as if it previously had climbed higher; what was visible of the remainder appeared whole. Each of the steps was wide enough to accommodate two adults at a time. Their surfaces had been grooved by the passage of countless feet. I circled the staircase warily. There were no individual bricks or slabs I could see; the entire thing appeared to have been carved from a single piece of material. I swam closer. I thought the staircase might have been struck from a great block of stone, cut free from a mountain, or chiseled from a tree of Redwood proportions, but the texture of the material was wrong for either. I reached out and touched the nearest step. It was warm and, though apparently firm enough to support the combined weight of countless people, oddly spongy. I eased myself over until I was directly above the stair, then rested on it, ready to spring off should the staircase threaten to give way. When it did not, I decided I would follow these steps down for as long as was safe.

As I descended step to step, I reflected on my experience. Obviously, the map of the next life I had charted was, to say the least, incomplete. When the tunnel of light had opened for me, I assumed myself *en route* to some version of paradise. Instead, I had been lured into what was, for all intents and purposes, a trap. Try as I might, I could not reconcile this with the details of any religions I knew, living or dead. The white void I saw might be hell or a similar place, but if such were the case, then why employ not only the bright tunnel, but the white trio to lure me there? Surely, a deity

powerful enough to create such a place would have no need to resort to trickery to deposit souls there; surely, there were more direct means available. Not to mention, if eternal damnation were my fate, you would not expect me to have evaded it with such relative ease. Nor did my impression of that great emptiness as living fit with the descriptions of hell I knew; though, I will admit, it put me in mind of those medieval paintings in which the gates of hell are represented as the mouth of an enormous scarlet head.

From the moment I started down them, I kept track of the number of stairs I descended. By the time I reached four hundred, I could distinguish more clearly the other shapes I had seen from above. In what looked the middle distance to my right, a slender spire stood alone. Several smaller beams angled from its base, but the light was too dim, the spire too far, for me to tell whether these were supports, or bridges, or smaller towers that had collapsed against this one. Conceivably, they might have been pieces of the spire, itself, upper reaches broken by the same cataclysm that had sundered the top of the staircase.

To my left was a trio of squat towers that gained definition as I passed the five hundredth step. The nearest of these was no more than fifteen or twenty feet away, the next-closest just the other side of it, and the third not much further beyond. They were constructed of small bricks, each approximately the size of my hand, of a style so basic as to be universal. A long gash split the nearest tower’s front wall; its companions showed similar damage. What was visible of the tower’s interior showed plain, undecorated rooms full of shattered furniture, chairs, and tables broken to kindling.

Far ahead, an elaborate archway marked one edge of the dark plane to which the staircase led. To either side and beyond, the archway was joined by low, box-like structures that reminded me of rows of apartments. It was in one of these, past the archway, that I saw a light shining in a rectangular opening I realized was a window. This was not the brilliance of the white tunnel and its minions; this was the homely glow of an oil lamp, a fireplace. The sight of it hurried my feet past the six hundredth step.

Another forty-three stairs and I reached the foot of the great staircase. In front of me stretched a broad, flat space. At about the level of my thigh, a thick, black fog rolled slowly over the plane. So dense was the stuff that I could not see through it. I eased one leg into it. The fog eddied around my

flesh. Under my foot, the plane was sandy, but not uncomfortable. I was reluctant to wade through it, but the gravity of this place seemed to have me in its grip. I could not float across; there was no choice but to walk through. Eyes fixed on the distant glow, I set off.

Overhead, lines of light sliced the sky into narrow strips of black. Although I still could identify the tunnel from which I fled, the remainder of my trip down the staircase had reduced its width further, to the point it was barely larger than its neighbors. While I am not much of a physical scientist, I felt fairly certain I had not crossed a sufficient distance to result in so dramatic a change in the tunnel's size. It was as if the stairs bridged more territory than they showed. I was unsure what this implied, beyond the suggestion that space did not appear to follow quite the same rules as it had the other side of death. I looked back at the staircase, the towers beside it and, yet though diminished slightly, nothing seemed as out of proportion as the white lines to which my eyes once more strayed. I saw them bending slightly at either end: so far to the right it was barely visible, they disappeared into a pale yellow glow that suffused the horizon; equally far to the left, they were swallowed by what might have been a wall of heavy gray clouds.

I reached the midpoint of my trek across the dark plane. So intrigued was I by that yellow light, that surface of roiling gray, I stopped in my tracks in order to study both more attentively. As I stood gazing at the sky, something bumped into me.

The collision occurred at about the level of my knee, and while not violent, so startled me that I leapt back. In so doing, I struck a second object, which sent me lurching into something else. All at once, it seemed, I could not move without encountering whatever was about me. My way forward had been blocked by whatever my leg had met, which seemed to have closed off the space behind me, as well. Around me, the dark fog shifted. That I had blundered into a fate equal to or worse than the one I escaped at the end of the white tunnel loomed before me as a distinct possibility.

Beyond the arch, the window dimmed, then brightened, its glow eclipsed by a shape whose outline appeared distinctly human. Of course, the white trio had looked human enough, at first, but something about this silhouette —the particularity of its form—spoke of the human in a way those gauzy shapes had not. The sight heartened me. If I were to reach that window, I

would have to find my way off this plane, which meant I must ascertain the nature of the objects that hemmed me in. I lowered myself into a crouch.

Even this close, the fog was tar-thick. Nonetheless, I distinguished an outline within it. In front and to the right, suspended horizontally in darkness as if in a bath or pool, was a man. He was naked, eyes closed, face calm, hands at his sides, legs together. I should place his age at thirty-five. I looked behind me and saw a woman, likewise suspended, naked, her face also blank. She appeared the same age as the man. Floating in the shadows beyond was another, somewhat older, man, and a child, a girl of perhaps twelve years of age, and another woman. As far as I could determine, the fog overlaying this plane was full of bodies. I stretched out my hand and touched the man in front of me. His skin was dry, papery; it crackled under my fingers. He seemed curiously light, not only from whatever quality of the fog kept him suspended, but as if he, himself, were hollow. Gently, I pushed his arm, and he swung away from me as if he were an oversized balloon. He bumped the person behind him, an old woman, who in turn jostled a younger woman beyond her, and so on. About half a dozen bodies away, one of them released a sound, a sort of high-pitched gasp. I straightened. At the spot from which the gasp emanated, the fog belled up. A man stood through it. He was tall, and within a decade or two of my age. His features were difficult to discern, because of what I took for wisps of fog clinging to his face. With a lurching gait, he staggered toward me. As he did, I saw that the black fog about his face spilled out of it, streaming from his eyes, his nostrils, his mouth, his ears. He raised his arms, and the motion unbalanced him, forcing him to half-run at me. When his hands found me, they gripped my shoulders with surprising strength. I caught his wrists and attempted to steady him, but he continued to push forward, thrusting his head at me, his mouth open.

I attempted to speak to him. “My dear fellow,” I said, but his fingers dug into my shoulders, his neck stretching, lengthening, bringing his gaping jaw near. Black vapor poured down his face, into the fog below. The sound of crackling filled my ears. I said, “Please, I am not—” but did not know how to conclude. I *wasn’t* , not the same as he was. I released his left wrist, clenched my hand, and struck what I hoped would be a solid blow to his sternum.

With the noise of a heavy paper bag tearing, my fist punched through his chest. A black cloud burst out of the wound. Horrified, I jerked my hand out of the man, whose hands let go of me. Black vapor venting from his chest, the man leaned back, as if trying to draw away from the hurt I caused him. His left arm drooped. He swayed to that side, and toppled under the fog, which leapt up where he splashed into it.

A mix of revulsion and confusion swept over me. The sight of a handful of men and women standing from the fog at various spots around me did nothing to help. I looked for the gateway, located it, and ran with all the speed my fear would lend. Black fog churned about me. My legs struck hidden bodies, sent them crashing into their neighbors. From points across the plane, other gasps sounded. Additional figures raised themselves out of the fog. I was reasonably certain they were moving in my direction, but was not inclined to stop to be absolutely sure. The gateway was close enough for me to see that, like the staircase that conveyed me here, it had been carved from a single block of material into the scene of an enormous battle. Dozens, if not hundreds, of men and women, dressed in armor and employing weapons whose style suggested ancient Greece, struggled against a quartet of huge, fantastic creatures. I was too concerned with reaching and passing through the gate to devote any more scrutiny to it. I was positive that, at any moment, a hand would seize my ankle and pull me down into the fog; either that, or I would find the clumsiness which had bedeviled my earthly existence had accompanied me to this place, and I would trip over my own feet and plunge myself beneath the fog.

Such, fortunately, was not the case. I ran through the huge gate, and among the buildings beyond. A backward glance showed a score, perhaps more, of men and women walking on the plane, none with any speed, and all a comfortable distance away. I slowed my pace, but did not stop running.

The space in which I found myself was wide, flat. The ground was the same sandy texture as it had been under the black fog. At random intervals, the stumps of what must have been modest trees raised edges broken and jagged. Long, low structures bordered the place. Each was two stories tall, constructed of the same, hand-sized bricks as the towers I had seen from the staircase. Their ground floors were punctuated by between fifteen and twenty plain wooden doors, their second stories by a pair of windows. All

of the buildings showed damage of a kind consistent with that I had observed done to the towers, tears and rents through their walls that revealed the wreckage of their interiors. An entire corner of a building to my left had collapsed; while a building to my right had been practically bisected.

The light that had set me on this course lay ahead, splashed over the interior of a window set to the right of a wooden door. To either side of this window and its door, the building in which they were set bore enormous holes. This close, I had a better view of the rooms that had been exposed by the damage; though their contents were a jumble, I noted a mirror in a gilt frame, a polished chest of drawers, and a large bookcase full of fat volumes. As I drew nearer my destination, my run slowed, until it was a brisk walk. I strode up to the door, one hand raised to knock on it, and it swung open.Framed in the doorway was a devil.

Or, rather, framed in the doorway was a man dressed as a devil. His costume consisted of a red, satiny bodysuit that rose to a tight-fitting hood from the front of which sprang a pair of fabric horns. His face was ornamented with a Van Dyke no doubt intended to accentuate his infernal appearance. His hands were fitted with black gloves, his feet with black boots, and over the bodysuit, he wore a pair of black shorts from the left leg of which dangled a fabric tail, complete with barb.

The sight of him halted me where I was. With a wave of his hand, the man urged me inside, saying, “Come on, come on!” I hurried past him into a narrow hallway. He shut the door and secured it with a quartet of heavy locks and bolts. “It’s too much,” he said, “for the Hungry Men, and not nearly enough for a Child of Nun. But then, what is enough for one of the Children? You can’t call it peace of mind, but you can call it the illusion of peace of mind, which, oddly, *provides* a certain peace of mind.” The man walked by me to the end of the hall, where three doors opened right, center, and left, respectively. He pushed the door to the right, and gestured for me to follow.

I did, and entered a high-ceilinged room whose red wallpaper, oriental carpet, and fire snapping in a marble fireplace suggested the drawing room of a Victorian gentleman, an impression bolstered by the pair of high-backed leather chairs positioned before the fire. Under the room’s window,

an arts-and-crafts-style desk was stacked with papers and books, as was the abbreviated table to its left. The room was warm, even cozy. The man in the devil costume closed the door behind me and crossed to a small stand holding a crystal decanter and a collection of tumblers. He said, “Can I offer you a drink?”

If the question was absurd, it was no less so than anything else I had experienced thus far. I said, “I take it that isn’t ambrosia.”

“It is very good scotch,” he said.

With something like good humor, I said, “Perhaps this is paradise, after all.”

The man’s face fell. “Oh no,” he said. “In days gone by, it was—it was something, but not now, no.”

He poured liberal portions into two of the glasses, and held one to me. With thanks, I took it. The dense odor of peat and brine, leavened with honey, hovered over the liquor. I said, “What shall we toast?”

“There is nothing to toast,” he answered.

“For me, there is,” I said. “I shall drink to your offering me shelter in this—in this place.”

The man did not reply, though he took an ample sip from his glass. The scotch burned down my throat like the water of life its creators had christened it. I said, “Permit me to introduce myself. I am Maxwell James Barry, late of the city of Wiltwyck, New York,” and extended my hand.

“I am pleased to make your acquaintance,” the man said, taking my hand in his. “When I walked amongst the living, I was called Herbert Herne.”

“And now,” I said, “are you known as Mephistopheles?”

For a moment, my host did not appear to comprehend my joke, then understanding lit his face and he said, “The costume, yes—even here, it must look odd. Call it a bit of self-mockery, and something of an act of self-censure, the scarlet without the A, if you see what I mean.”

“What use is such a gesture, here?” I asked. “I admit, I wondered whether this might be hell; in which case, your action might be appropriate. However, I strongly suspect this is not hell, and so must question the need for your penance.”

“Not penance,” Herbert Herne said. He drank the rest of his liquor. “I do not repent anything I did. *Anything.* At the same time, I recognize its cost. I know how I would be judged, were there any left here to judge me. It is out of deference to those absent intentions that I bear this sign in place of the one with which they would have branded me.”

“I don’t understand,” I said. “Can you tell me where we are, what this place is called?”

“I can.” Herne refilled his glass, held out the decanter to me. I shook my head. He replaced the container and said, “We are in what remains of First Heaven, sometimes known as *Šamû* . It was here that the first men and women to depart the lands of the living found their way.”

“Who is its creator?” I said.

Herne shrugged. “Some say it appeared when the chaos that preceded everything grew chaotic to itself and birthed form and order. Others say it is a remnant of the paradise of another cosmos. It was here long before our universe burst into existence. It was a rough, rude place, an island floating in a Sea of Chaos from which creatures vast and terrifying emerged, giants with a hundred arms, dragons whose fire melted rock, chimeras whose hooves sundered the ground. The first inhabitants were confused, afraid. They built what shelter they could from the raw material at hand and huddled together for comfort. For decades, centuries, longer, as the island’s population grew, little changed. The shelters became more elaborate, but the beasts of the surrounding deep, the Children of Nun, as they were later called, continued to climb onto the island and rampage through the buildings in their paths, carrying off what inhabitants they could to a fate none of their companions wanted to guess.

“Not until the arrival of a young man to whom posterity would give the name amar-Utu did the islanders’ situation improve. While alive—somewhere in Mesopotamia, the stories say—this amar-Utu had not been held of much account, because of a right leg that was noticeably shorter than the left. No such affliction troubled his spirit form—what the residents of these parts call the *ka* . Once arrived and apprised of the state of affairs, he set about improving them. Such efforts had been made before, of course, over and over, but none who attempted them possessed amar-Utu’s

combination of charm and brilliance. The inhabitants had established a watch along the island's shores, but its staffing was irregular. amar-Utu convinced the islanders to maintain a more consistent schedule, and to set up a network of runners to pass the sentries' alarms more efficiently. In the same way, he improved and extended the shelters that had been built. His chief accomplishment, though, was in devising a strategy for confronting, defeating, and binding the Children of Nun.

"It was a labor to be measured in centuries. amar-Utu fashioned weapons to be used against the beasts. He organized the islanders into an army. He led this army against the beasts and, when it was defeated, forged new and better weapons. In the end, he and his forces dismembered several of the worst monsters, and pursued the rest to their lairs in the deep, where they chained them fast."

I asked, "What became of this amar-Utu?"

Herne said, "He left. Once Šamû was secure, and its people could turn their attention to building it into something more grand—a heaven worthy of the name—amar-Utu took his leave. In his campaigns about the island, he discovered it was not, in fact, an island, but the tip of a much larger land mass to which it was joined by a slender bridge of rock. Accompanied by Muš̰uššu, one of the Children of Nun he won over to his side, he set out to explore that other place. As the population of First Heaven grew, some of its more adventurous inhabitants followed him to what would be called Second Heaven. amar-Utu was no longer there, though he left signs indicating he had traveled further still into the unknown, moving through what those to come after him named Third, Fourth, and Fifth Heavens. By the time I arrived here, there were a full dozen heavens. amar-Utu's whereabouts were long-unknown; if asked, most inhabitants said he had 'gone to deeper heaven.'"

"What happened here, then?" I asked. "Did amar-Utu return and find the place not to his liking?"

"Oh no," Herne said. "amar-Utu has remained unseen despite the catastrophe. There were, naturally, some who looked to his return in their hour of need, but they were… disappointed." Before I could repeat my

question, he continued, “As for what befell this and the other heavens: I did.”

“You?”

“In life, I worked in insurance,” Herne said. “I resided in Hartford, Connecticut, during the first decades of the twentieth century. I was something of a prodigy at puzzles, games, figures, and this talent served me well. Upon graduation from high school, I obtained a position at a medium-sized insurance company, where my abilities allowed me to achieve ten years’ promotions in three. It occasioned no small jealousy in those I vaulted over, but I was otherwise well-liked. I performed in a community theater—*Faustus* , yes, among our productions, though I was cast as Wagner—and regularly attended the local Methodist church. When the United States entered the Great War, I was not enthusiastic to enlist; indeed, it required all my acting skills to convince my fellow workers that only my sense of responsibility to the company restrained me from joining the mad dash to bayonet a Hun in the name of liberty. With the war’s end, I judged myself safe from foreign peril. I did not reckon on the Influenza epidemic of 1918, which conveyed me, and so many others, here.

“The possibilities for me in this place—once I adjusted to the revelation that it was not the destination Reverend MacGonagle had assured me was awaiting—the possibilities were as large as was it. I opted to work in one of the libraries, the better to learn about my new home. It was amidst the bookcases that I read the history of this place, the story of amar-Utu, which, as I’m sure you can imagine, is considerably more elaborate than the summary I provided you. I was fascinated with what the historians named the *Titanes Theoi* , the Straining Gods, the Children of Nun that amar-Utu and his forces had conquered and bound. Even here, on the other side of the grave, it was hard to credit that such fantastic things could exist. I made inquiries and found that, if I so desired, a guide would lead me to the Straining Gods. I should not have been so amazed: when eternity is the measure of your days, you realize all things are possible, and make plans for them.

“An older woman, a member of the army—largely a ceremonial force—met me on the far side of First Heaven, in sight of the rock bridge to Second Heaven. We were on the shore, where the Sea of Chaos does not look much

different from any other sea. My guide, whose name was Cosette, walked toward the sea, at the very edge of which a stone slab had been sunk into the ground. She stepped onto it, and down onto another below it, and so on. I followed her, and we descended a staircase that skirted the very edge of the Sea of Chaos, but did not touch it. It was as if a wall of glass held the sea back, though I could not see any such glass present. Most of the way was dark, lit by lamps placed every hundred steps. I made what conversation I could with Cosette, but she was not talkative—odd, for a guide. There were ten thousand steps between First Heaven and the Straining Gods. We took them at a steady pace. At the bottom, we arrived at a flat, square space bordered by darkness. I walked to one side of the square and said, 'Where are they?'

"'Look,' Cosette said, and it was as if her command adjusted my vision. There, in front of me, no further away than the reach of my arm, was a nightmare. It was immense as a mountain is immense, a rounded bulk whose mouth was wide enough to swallow a battleship. Teeth—fangs tall as sequoias jutted from its lower jaw. Its three eyes were dim moons set high above. It appeared to be lying on its belly, its head propped toward me. In the distance beyond it, other forms, larger still, loomed in the darkness.

"I screamed," Herne said. "I am not ashamed to admit it. Making matters worse, I could see no chains encircling the beast. I said as much to Cosette when she ran to my side. My guide pointed out a slender rope strung around the creature. Similar bonds, she said, held all the remaining Straining Gods. You can appreciate the skepticism with which I met this information. I wondered if this were an elaborate joke, an entertainment for bored immortals, but Cosette was earnest. In front of us, the ends of the rope met in an elaborate knot that had callused the great beast's warty hide. Cosette took my hand and pressed it to the knot. I thought she wanted to make a point about the pattern into which the rope had been tied. When my palm brushed the rope, though, an electric jolt shot through me. With that shock came understanding.

"You will remember I mentioned those islanders the Children of Nun had carried off with them. One of amar-Utu's pledges to the inhabitants of Šamû had been that he would learn their fate and, if possible, rescue them. He fulfilled the first half of his pledge. After he and his army pursued the

monsters to their lairs at the bottom of the Sea of Chaos, he discovered those who had been taken for provender. I am not sure if you've discovered this, yet, but we *ka* are difficult to destroy outright. It is not utterly impossible, but it is beyond the power even of the Children of Nun. What the creatures could do was feed on their captives, suck and scrape every last vestige of everything that made those men and women who they were out of them, until all that remained was a husk, too tough for digestion. Emptied, the husks wandered the lairs, hungry for what they had lost. They attacked amar-Utu and his forces, who defeated them handily. Once the soldiers realized what the Hungry Men were, they were aghast.

"I do not know what led amar-Utu to recognize that the stuff of the Hungry Men could be fashioned into bonds that would hold the Children of Nun. His words on the subject are vague. It would have been an awful scene. The end result was that, when amar-Utu and his forces subdued each of the remaining beasts, they had a means with which to restrain it. Various writers to come after amar-Utu sought to rationalize his decision, but it seemed clear to me that he did not depart Šamû to search out what was ahead, but to escape what lay behind.

"I could have viewed the remaining beasts—there were another three—but that one was enough. The return from my excursion left me with much to consider. Not least amongst it was the knot securing the monster's bonds. As we mounted the stairs, I asked Cosette if she did not fear that the knot might loosen. Of course she assumed I was foisting my anxiety onto her, and told me there was no need to worry. amar-Utu, himself, had devised and tied the knot that held this and all of the Children of Nun. She did not know how much attention I had given the knot, but its complexity was such that none who studied it since could work out how to undo it. Tug at one part of it, and you tightened another. Solving the Gordian knot would have been simpler. I reminded my guide that Alexander had answered that riddle with the edge of his sword. Such a reply, she assured me, would be useless in this case, as no blade in anyone's possession could sever the *ka* rope in which this knot and its brethren had been tied. Even were someone to own so fine a sword, who would use it to that end?"

I interrupted Herne. "You would. You did."

Herne said, “You must understand, from the instant my eyes fell upon that knot, its solution was obvious to me. This was part of the reason I became as agitated as I had at Cosette’s assertion that this slim rope was sufficient to the task of holding a Straining God in check. With a quick pull of the correct loop, the design that was responsible for keeping this unlikely prison in place could be undone, which seemed the clearest madness. Twice, I was on the verge of speaking to Cosette about it, the first time when she pointed out the knot to me, the second while we climbed the stairs.”

“Why didn’t you?” I asked.

“I doubted myself,” Herne said. “In the face of Cosette’s expression of utter faith in the knot, I assumed I was mistaken. After all, how many men and women must have viewed that knot before me? Was it likely that, after none of them had been able to untie it, I should understand the means to do so the moment I saw it? And yet, and yet… I *had* apprehended its undoing. I was as sure of it as I had ever been of anything. Fearing embarrassment, I kept silent. Back in my quarters, however, I immediately found a length of rope and set about first tying the knot, which took me several tries, and then untying it, which I managed on my first attempt. My success did nothing to reassure me. I was certain I must have missed something in the fashioning of the knot, some detail that would render my solution of it null and void. At the same time, I knew that nothing had escaped my notice. I searched the library’s holdings for images of amar-Utu’s knot, and every last one of them I found matched the copies I had made.

“Then why not share your knowledge?” I said. “Surely, the powers who oversaw this place would have appreciated your discovery.”

“Perhaps they would have,” Herne said. “Or perhaps they would have imprisoned the man in possession of such information, fearful of the use to which he might put it.”

“Would they have been wrong?”

“It was all I thought about,” Herne said. “If there was a piece of thread lying about, I tied it into amar-Utu’s knot and untied it. If there was a pen or pencil and a sheet of paper, I drew the steps to constructing the knot. If my hands were empty, they went through the motions of looping this end of the

rope through that. If I were to say I was outraged by the use to which the *ka* of those long-ago captives had been put, that I burned for vengeance on their behalf, I expect my motivations would sound more compelling. But if I were disturbed by the material from which the Children of Nun's bindings had been drawn, I understood and accepted the necessity for it. No, what led me to return to that staircase on my own, to descend the ten thousand stairs, to stand once more in front of that Straining God, was nothing so grand. It was more a case of the knot's solution pushing its way out of my fingertips."

"Obviously," I said, "you were correct."

Herne said, "I had not anticipated the speed with which the beast would seize the opportunity I presented it. Despite millennia of imprisonment, during which it was fed nothing, it heaved itself up with the suddenness of an earthquake. Beyond it, the other beasts groaned and thrashed. I fled for the staircase, sure that I was going to be the morsel with which the monster would break its fast. It rose past me, larger even than I had appreciated. I was afraid it would smash the staircase on its way, which, despite my terrified state, I realized would constitute a kind of poetic justice, but though its bulk veered close, it completed its ascent without destroying my means of escape.

"I returned to war in the heavens. The great beast hung in the air. Its canyon mouth yawned, swallowing flaming missiles like so many fireflies. Its three tails raked the ground, toppling buildings as if they were children's blocks. Up and down its armored flanks, bombs and rockets burst in flashes of white, yellow, and orange. Behind its blunt head, an enormous mane dangled its ends above the forces gathered below. As I watched, one of the strands snaked into the ranks and jerked up, carrying a man with it. Other strands followed, plucking the defenders from their positions. The mane was composed not of hair, but of tentacles, each one terminating in a mouth. Once it wrapped around a man or woman, the tentacle's mouth sought his or her chest, clamped onto it, and fed. When the defender was drained, emptied, in the process of a minute, less, the tentacle dropped the remains and went in search of new prey. It was as if I watched a grotesque resident of the Pacific's depths, a fish half-dinosaur, feasting on a shoal of hapless fry. To be sure, there were those who remembered their last battle against

this beast, but surprise gave it an advantage that the panic and confusion of the other inhabitants cemented. Vast as it was, it swelled with the lives on which it gorged, moving through the heavens with the slow, steady pace of a fire devouring a forest. In the end, it settled its bulk on the remnants of Seventh Heaven. From there, its tentacles rose into the sky, arcing toward the line of light that marks the boundary between this place and the world of the living."

"The bright tunnel," I said.

"Yes," Herne said. "The beast's limbs have enlarged over time."

"The figures within?"

"Parasites, I believe," Herne said. "They live off what they can siphon from the *ka* on its way to the beast. The tranquilizing effect they produce facilitates the process of consumption, so the creature tolerates them."

"Does no one escape?"

"Some," Herne said. "Enormous as the beast's appetite and reach are, it has its limits. Some elude its clutches; others, it never gets around to."

"What becomes of them?"

"Most find their way to what remains of the heavens. A few wander the dark. If those who arrive here can evade the Hungry Men, they usually wind up at my front door."

"I see no one else," I said.

"Come," Herne said, walking to the door. "Bring your drink, if you like."

I had forgotten I held it. I would rather have set it down, the taste for alcohol having left me, but already, Herne was through the doorway, so I carried the tumbler with me. He opened the door to the right of this one—the door at the end of the front hall—and started down a flight of wooden stairs. I hurried after him.

We entered a considerable basement, one which must have served for the entire building. Its walls were several feet higher than those of the room in which Herne had entertained me and, together with its breadth and width, gave the feel of having served as a market place, a common where the residents of the building could have gathered for conversation and commerce. The use to which Herne had put it, however, was anything but

benign. From the wreckage of the rooms above, the surrounding buildings, he had scavenged material to construct the devices of a torture chamber. A pair of crude racks leaned against the opposite wall. A handful of heavy wooden tables, from whose corners thick chains dangled, occupied the center of the floor. Beside each, a smaller table held an assortment of knives, a sheaf of paper, and a mug filled with pens. A Catherine Wheel stood at the far end of the space. At points across the ceiling, coarse ropes draped sturdy pulleys. Herne was talking, explaining all of this, but while I heard his voice, his words did not register. Chained to the wall between the racks, a slender man with large eyes and ears regarded our entrance with terror. On either side of each rack, one of the creatures from which I had fled on the plane—the Hungry Men—had been bound.

Herne was counting on my shock at the sight of the room and its inmates to paralyze me. It very nearly did, which would have allowed him to strike me with the truncheon he had slipped from a hook on the wall at the top of the stairs. As it was, he caught my left wrist with his left hand and was in the process of pulling me into the blow he started with his right hand when I smashed the glass in my right hand into his face. Scotch misted the air. One of the shards drove into his left eye. He screamed, releasing my arm and dropping the club. Splinters of glass stuck up from my fingers, but I ignored them, driving my left fist into Herne's mouth. Dazed, he retreated, backing up a step. I took advantage of his movement, shoving him toward the nearest large table. He did not comprehend what I was doing until I pushed him half-onto the table and cuffed one of his wrists. He struggled, but my blood was up, and I struck his face again. I believe he expected me to turn his instruments on him, to seize one of the knives arrayed to my right and set its edge to his skin, but my chief concern was my safety, not his punishment—however deserved such might be.

My next thought was for the man fettered to the wall. There were assorted tools propped against the tables; I selected a sledge hammer and used it to break the plaster which anchored the chains to the wall. Free to move, the man walked to the nearest of the small tables and removed a set of keys hung under it. From these, he chose the key that unlocked his manacles.

Next, we began the laborious process of introductions and explanations. I say laborious because the man, whose name was Franz, spoke German, a

language with which I have only a passing acquaintance. He knew a smattering of English, so we muddled through as best we could. He had died relatively young and arrived in the heavens in the last stages of the war against the great beast. He joined a rocket brigade in time to witness it torn asunder by the monster's limbs. After evading its tentacles, he roamed the ruined heavens, encountering the occasional fellow-survivor, shocked and despondent. Among these remnants, there was a move to leave this place, to set out for deeper heaven—"to follow amar-Utu," as the phrase went. In the end, each of Franz's companions elected to undertake this journey. Theirs was a choice he could not embrace; though he could not say why. In time, this led him here, to Herbert Herne, who captured and tortured him.

Have no doubt, I demanded answers from Herne, who, surprisingly, was happy to give them. Left alone, he had become fascinated, then obsessed, with the material of the *ka* , with the uses to which it might be put. After all, it sufficed to restrain the Children of Nun, a single one of whom was sufficient to wreck the twelve heavens. What, Herne wondered, might a man who had the crafting of such stuff do? What might he become? He ransacked the remains of the library, and while no one would admit to having carried out experiments in this direction, a few authors had speculated—sometimes in considerable detail—on the potential applications of the *ka* and the means by which those ends might be wrought. An abundance of raw materials lay at his disposal, including the remnants of those who had been drained by the beast, the Hungry Men. His laboratory complete, Herne succeeded in luring the creatures in ones and twos from the black fog in which they resided and trapping them. His testing of them had not been without success, but those very successes prompted him to wonder how much more he might accomplish with a soul not emptied of its essence. Herne observed the occasional survivor of the great beast's devastation picking his or her way through the rubble, and though he worried they might be wary of him, it proved laughably easy to coax them into his dwelling and subdue them. What Franz described as torture had been no more than the process by which he prepared the *ka* for its new role, breaking it down to a state in which it might be fashioned into any number of… devices. To be candid, it was both a lengthy and an unpleasant affair for the subject of his attentions, but there was no malice

behind it, only the disinterest of the craftsman preparing the material upon which he would work.

I feared the man mad, unhinged by the ruination he had precipitated. Yet Herne described his endeavors with a level of detail that gave the appearance of rationality, diseased though it might be. At the end of his account, I expressed my skepticism, to which Herne responded by directing me upstairs, to the one door I had not opened. Naturally, I suspected a trap, but my curiosity was piqued, and I ascended the stairs. I took what precautions I could, and opened the final door.

The room I entered was of the same dimensions as the study into which Herne first led me. Its wallpaper was white, its floor bare wood, its marble fireplace dark. In the center of the floor, a round table supported three objects. I approached it cautiously. Arranged in a triangle were a lens, a wand, and a coil of rope. The lens was approximately the size of a dinner plate, its upturned side convex. A slender gold ring enclosed its circumference, and seemed to lend its shine to the depths of the glass. The wand was long as a man's forearm, its surface pale and smooth. It was bowed in the middle, tapered at the ends. The coil of rope was small enough to rest in my palm. It did not appear braided; rather, it was a single, golden strand. That these could be props in an extended joke occurred to me: the man who had sent me to them was dressed in costume, and not just any costume, at that. But the air above them quivered, vivid with energy. I could almost see the suggestion of a face in the glass of the lens, the outline of a bone in the shape of the wand, the texture of a length of hair in the rope. Knowing what they were—what they had been—I could not bring myself to handle them. Not then…

The lens allows its holder to focus himself into another location, no matter how distant. It permitted me to join you here, tonight. The wand is a tool, something like a pen, and something like a sword. The use of the rope, Herne has not taught to me, yet. Yes, I have had to continue my dealings with the man. In the end, his store of knowledge was too great for me to forego. Franz has not been happy with my decision, but he understands my reasoning. I charged him with the task of guarding Herne, whom I was compelled to release from the rack. Franz watches Herne closely; all the same, I am careful in his company. I believe—

Barry’s next words were interrupted by his image faltering. As if he were a television channel whose signal had ebbed, his outline blurred, his color dulled. His voice disappeared. For long seconds, Torres, Schaefer, and myself stared at the place in his chair where the shadowy outline that had been our late friend flickered. It regained its definition just long enough for Max Barry to deliver his final words to us: “My time with you is almost done. When I have progressed in my study of the lens, I shall contact you again. In the meantime, I am in the company of the devil and a man who assures me he was an agnostic. The heavens lie in ruins. Perhaps we may repair them. Perhaps, if amar-Utu will not return to us, we may seek him out, win his aid. If he will not, we may subdue the great beast, ourselves. I am in possession of Herne’s inventions, and they are mighty. Every day, I learn more about them. It may be that they will prove sufficient to rout the monster. It may be that others will be required.

“Tell those who are nearing the end of their time in this world to beware the light, the bright tunnel and its denizens. In the light lies annihilation. Tell them to seek the broken staircase. But fly, fly the hungry light.”

June, 1987. Hitchhiking, Mr. Norris

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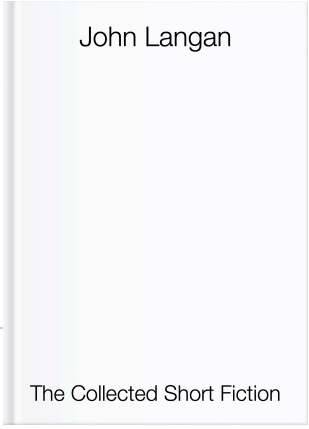

Once, when he was eight, Laird had asked his father about hitchhiking.

"Boy," his father had said to him, "you do not hitchhike."

"You did," he'd answered.

"Times were different, then. Now…"

"What if I don't have a choice? What if it's an emergency?"

"You can call for help on the radio."

"What if the radio's broken?"

"Holmes's cabin's four miles due east. You should be able to make that in half an hour, easy."

"You have to cross the river to get there. What if it's flooded?"

His father had sighed, deeply, and the boy had felt the first stirrings of nervousness. "Why can't you let this be?"

He'd looked away. "I just want to know. In case there's an emergency."

After a moment during which he could feel the weight of his father's gaze resting on him, the old man had said, "All right. If the radio's broken, and the river's in flood, and whatever else I can't imagine has left you with no choice but to hitchhike, then you wait and you watch. You pick a car with a family in it, a dad, a mom, couple of kids. You should be okay that way. You do not wave at a police car; you see a police car coming, you walk along like you're on a Sunday stroll. And you do not, you absolutely do not, flag down a car or a truck with a single driver. No way, uh-uh. You're better off staying with whatever disaster it is than getting in a car with some strange guy."

He'd wanted to ask his father why he had to avoid solo drivers, what was so bad about them, but he'd sensed his father at the end of his patience, and had let the question go unasked.

Now, nine years later, his head still spinning from whatever had been in the cloth Mr. Norris had pressed to his face, his arms and legs useless, Laird thought, *Right you were, Dad.*

Ten feet in front of him, the man who had offered him a ride on the outskirts of Big Delta had the trunk of his car propped open and was bent over inside it. To either side of him within the gaping space, Laird could see what looked like bricks, stacked in rough mounds. Ballast, he supposed, for bad weather; a car as old as this one would need all the help it could get once the weather soured. His worn tweed jacket riding up the back of his white shirt, Mr. Norris stretched for something deep in the trunk. He was whistling: "I'm On the Top of the World." Head still down, he withdrew a pair of squat candles, one of which he set on each of the brick mounds.

Pretty much the moment the car door had slammed shut, Mr. Norris had offered one soft hand in welcome and declared himself an accountant, retired early to see these grand United States while he was still able to enjoy them. Never settled down, Mr. Norris had continued while his cathedral of a car had rolled along the Alaska Highway. Just… never happened. Used to think it was a failing on his part, but now that he'd left his job behind, there was no one holding him back, no one telling him he couldn't drive cross country if that was what he felt like doing for the next year. He'd gone on like that for a while, describing the spots he'd visited in the bland enthusiasm of a travel brochure: the White House, the St. Louis Arch, the Grand Canyon. The man hadn't seemed an accountant; he'd projected none of the crispness, the precision you would expect from someone who'd spent his adult years managing people's money. His threadbare tweed jacket, his wrinkled shirt and trousers, had marked him as a member of a less prestigious profession, an assistant manager who'd never advanced. Even the itinerary that had continued to spill out of his mouth had sounded forced —rehearsed, lines in a monologue he'd written for himself. If a little peculiar, Laird had judged it none of his business. Plenty of people came to Alaska looking to reinvent themselves, leave the calamities of their old

lives behind and become something else, something new. So Mr. Norris wanted to be a retired accountant: let him be a retired accountant.

He'd seen the white handkerchief in the man's right hand, but hadn't registered it as a threat. The recitation of place names pouring out of Mr. Norris's mouth had numbed him, somehow, so that even when the cloth had pressed against his nose and mouth, it had taken him an almost shocking amount of time to process what was happening, and then it had been too late.

There was a couple hundred dollars in his bag, the proceeds of a month's assorted odd jobs for an old woman whose cataracted sight had contracted her world to the first floor of her bungalow. Laird hoped that might be enough for Mr. Norris, but he doubted it. When the man withdrew from the trunk of his car and turned to him, the roll of duct tape in his left hand and the length of knife in his right confirmed that doubt.

Laird had his own blade tucked down the back of his jeans, a KA-BAR he'd bought off an old trucker in his cups who claimed it had seen him safely out of the Chosin Reservoir. As yet, Mr. Norris had not discovered it, but if he intended to truss Laird up (and especially if he had any designs on, say, removing Laird's jeans), then he'd find the knife and that would be that. The adrenaline surging through his blood felt as if it were burning up whatever had soaked that handkerchief, but not fast enough. There was no point in calling for help: for one thing, his tongue was as sluggish as the rest of him; for another, the evergreens clustered around them were a clear indication Mr. Norris had left the highway in favor of a more secluded location. He waited until Mr. Norris was crossing the distance between them to say, "Wait."

The man had not realized he'd regained consciousness. His whistle died on his lips, and he stopped in his tracks, which put him slightly beyond the reach of Laird's right boot. His brows lowered in consternation.

"If it's money…" Laird started.

"It isn't money," the man said.

"You can't—"

"Oh yes I can," Mr. Norris said; although his words lacked the confidence it would have required to make them sound truly threatening. However

many times he'd done this before, Laird guessed, his victims had been unconscious. He said, "Why?"

"You wouldn't—"

"Does it have to do with that?" He shook his head at the trunk, its brick piles with their candles.

The look that passed over Mr. Norris's face was equal parts fear and admiration. "Maybe you would understand," he said. "Although," he added through a half-laugh, "I'm not sure I do." He lowered himself into a crouch. "This car," he said, "it's not a car. Well, of course it is, but it's also something else. It's an instrument, like a pen. Yes, a pen. The earth is its paper. I'm using it—I'm like the hand that uses it to write a sentence. Only, in this case, it's not so much a sentence I'm writing as a word—a kind of word—a word that's also a hole in the paper—and what comes through the hole. I know, it's all very confusing.

"Anyhow, a pen needs ink, or what good is it? A pen that's doing this kind of work requires special ink. I don't suppose I have to tell you what that is, do I?"

Laird said nothing.

"I didn't think so," Mr. Norris said. "What I've done is, I've tinkered with the floor of the trunk, so that, once I have a fresh source of ink in there, and I've made the requisite… openings, the ink can spill out in a uniform stream that's fine enough not to attract the notice of any of the authorities. You would be amazed at how far I can travel, how much penmanship I can complete, before I have to stop and look for a new source.

"I'll tell you one more thing, and then I'm going to have to resume my work. *I'm very close to being done.* I'm not sure if you'll be quite enough for what remains, but I can't imagine I'll need even all of another young man or woman after you. I can't tell you… Can you feel it?" Mr. Norris swept his arms around him, almost upsetting his balance. "I'm no longer alone; I haven't been for some time, now. The Word's attendants, its supplicants… As I've drawn nearer to the end of my task, I've had glimpses of them—not enough to say what I've seen with any certainty, just that they're present, all around me."

As if in reply, the branches of the evergreens around them clashed in a sudden breeze, and Laird thought the spaces between them darkened. There wasn't time to worry about that, though; if he were going to make a move, this was the time. He concentrated on his right foot, on throwing himself forward and lashing out as hard as he could, connecting the toe of his workboot with Mr. Norris's face, or, better, his throat. He didn't see much point to a prayer, so he went ahead with the kick.

His leg failed him. Instead of crushing Mr. Norris's nose or collapsing his windpipe, it made it no higher than his left knee. The man yelped and, his eyes wide with shock and pain, toppled onto his ass. Forcing himself to move, Laird turned on his side, grabbing for the KA-BAR and catching its hilt on the first try. He rolled back, bringing the knife up to meet what he was sure would be the downward stroke of Mr. Norris's blade, but the man had dropped his knife and was struggling to his feet. The roll of tape was still in his other hand. Laird lunged for him, but his legs hadn't regained sufficient strength, and he fell, slashing wildly as he went. He heard a scream, then was on his face. The scream continued as he strained to push himself to his feet. Finally, he had to settle for flipping himself onto his back, the knife up in the best guard he could manage.

He need not have worried. Mr. Norris was on his knees in front of the open trunk. The backs of his trousers, the skin and meat beneath them, had been sliced open, skin and fabric bright with blood. Laird's swipe had hamstrung him. He supposed he was not out of danger, yet, but he found the continuous scream climbing from the man's mouth oddly reassuring.

By the time his legs were steady enough to stand on, Mr. Norris's scream had faded to a drone. He'd wiped the KA-BAR clean on the grass; now, the knife held point up in front of him, Laird circled around Mr. Norris until he came to the front passenger door. It was open. He reached in for his bag and saw as he did so that the key was still in the ignition. For half an instant, he contemplated taking the car, before rejecting the idea. That was what he needed, to be pulled over driving a stolen car whose trunk was a forensic scientist's nightmare of swirled bloodstains. Even had he been willing to chance it, his gorge rose at the prospect of sitting surrounded by this thing, this rolling abattoir.

That left the question of what to do with Mr. Norris. Ten minutes ago, fighting for his life, he would have had no trouble opening the man from nave to chops with his knife. The battle over, though, the man bested, crippled, killing him became a more problematic affair. Not that Laird saw anything wrong in dragging the KA-BAR across Mr. Norris's throat, but he might be able to provide the police with information about the people he'd bled to death in the trunk of his car, and that might mean something to family members still hoping for news of their son or daughter. The man had not changed his position; afraid, no doubt, of further pain; and Laird did not figure him for much of a flight risk. All the same, he dipped back into the car, shoved his knife among the wires tangled under the steering wheel, and did what damage he could.

A single path, more an indentation in the underbrush, led out of the clearing. The sun hadn't moved too much in the sky, so he probably wasn't that far a walk from Big Delta. Maintaining a wide space between himself and the back of the car, Laird made for the exit. He did not hold his knife at the ready, but neither did he return it to its place under the back of his jeans.

As he passed the trunk, Mr. Norris stopped moaning. The KA-BAR raised, Laird stopped and turned to him. The man's face was white as flour. "Where are you going?" he said.

"Back to Big Delta."

"You can't do that! You can't leave me here!"

"Don't worry, you're not gonna bleed to death. Not before the cops get here, at least. It doesn't look like I hit any arteries."

"That's—they're coming! Do you understand me? They're coming!"

"I know: I'm going to fetch them."

"Not the police, you stupid hick. The attendants. The supplicants. They're all around us, and they won't be able to resist the blood…"

Laird had some smart reply ready for the man, but movement on the far side of the car stilled his tongue. He looked in that direction, toward where the evergreens were thickest, where it was darker than it should have been this time in the afternoon. The trees shifted with a breeze he didn't feel, and then he saw it wasn't the trees moving, it was what was between the trees,

the tall, spindly things he had mistaken for their shadows. For a moment, he watched them stepping forward, raising legs that were much too thin too high, a comedian's parody of walking quietly, and then he was running as fast as he could in the other direction, out of the clearing along the path that wound across a great meadow.

He tripped, caught his foot, and went into a forward roll from which he emerged up and running. Somewhere behind him, he was aware of a terrible sound, but he did not let that stop him. His chest was a bellows full of white-hot air. His arms and legs were knots of pain. He kept running until he reached the highway, until he was nearly run down by a UPS driver. He took the ride the man offered him and did not once look back at the way he'd come.

He did not tell anyone about Mr. Norris, or any of it.

Mother of Stone

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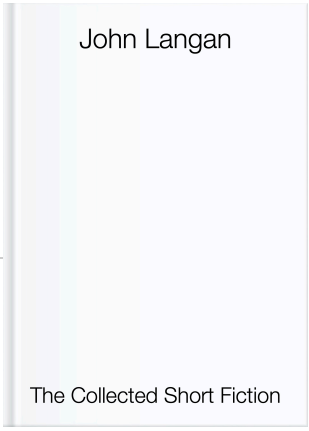

1

No one who was present for any of it will say much, at least, not over the phone. In some cases, this appears due to embarrassment at the nature of the events, not to mention concern over their possible effects on business. One or two show what might be genuine unease, even fear, but it is difficult to judge their authenticity. They might be playing their parts as they feel the rumors demand. The Episcopal priest seems genuinely confused by her share of the narrative, but Episcopalians aren't much for clarity in these kinds of matters, are they?

Lawrence Schmidt, now the Wynkoop Inn's sole owner and proprietor, fails to answer two weeks' worth of e-mail and, when you finally have him on your cell, balks at saying more than that, while he was deeply saddened by Mrs. Torino's death, he doesn't feel it appropriate to indulge any of the… *gossip* that has accumulated around that terrible event. When you ask if this means that there was nothing out of the ordinary, unusual, in the weeks leading up to the car accident that decapitated nine-months' pregnant Rachel Torino—nothing related to a statue that had been unearthed on the Inn's grounds earlier that month—Lawrence answers that those are exactly the kinds of rumors he has no desire to feed. Your question about what is supposed to have taken place afterwards—you can think of no other word to describe it than the exorcism, or attempted exorcism, of that statue—provokes the man to something like anger. What is it you think you're playing at? he demands. He thought you said you were a college professor, a scholar, not a staff writer for the *Weekly World News.* Although you assure him of the legitimacy of your intentions and your credentials, it is obvious the conversation has reached its terminus. There seems little point in asking about Margaret Garrick, his former business partner, who dropped out of

sight immediately after the accident and has not been seen since, so you thank Lawrence for his time.

Yvonne Fisher, who was a waitress in the Inn's dining room, hangs up on you before you have finished explaining the reason for your call. Unsure if the disconnection was deliberate, you redial her number, only to have her Fuck Off confirm that she did hang up on you in the first place. Christina Henderson, another waitress, at least hears you out, but insists that she will not discuss anything over the phone. If you're in the neighborhood, get in touch and she'll see. As for the Reverend Maria Au Claire: once the parish secretary puts your second call to her through, the Episcopal priest spends most of her time parsing her words. Yes, there was an… she supposes you could call it an event some years ago. No, she wouldn't describe it as supernatural so much as preternatural; though she's open to the possibility it was some variety of mass hysteria. That said, *something* happened. For all the attention she devotes to worrying over her language, the Reverend conveys very little in the way of actual information and concludes the conversation by stating that she has an appointment waiting. No, she answers, she won't talk to you again on the phone.

Your attempts at discussing the circumstances surrounding Rachel Torino's death with those who reported it for the local newspapers fare little better. Naomi Glass, who covered the accident for the *Wiltwyck Daily Freeman,* claims no awareness, let alone knowledge, of the kind of events to which you allude, and, she assures you, she's always kept her ear pretty close to the ground. Nor can Jacqueline Pitlor, who writes for the *Middletown Times-Herald Record,* or Heidi Lima, of the *Poughkeepsie Journal,* add anything definitive to what they already have written; although Heidi Lima is willing to share a rumor—off the record, of course—that the reason for Margaret Garrick's disappearance is that, shortly after the accident, she suffered a complete breakdown, which necessitated her immediate and continuing hospitalization. Pretty Gothic, she says, wouldn't you agree?

2

If you are to research the relation between the online stories about the statue that was excavated and put on display at the Wynkoop Inn and actual

events, a discussion of which will form a chapter in the book you have proposed on Internet narratives (what you have christened electronic folklore)—in which one academic press has expressed qualified interest—it would appear you will have to leave your apartment in Garden City, rent the least-expensive car available, and drive two hours north, to Ulster County. While no doubt booking a room at the Inn for a couple of nights would be useful, the weight of such an accommodation is more than your strongest credit card can support, so instead you arrange to stay at the Great Republic Motel, whose website promises lodgings as grand as its name at a price you can afford. To stretch your budget as far as you can, you reserve for a Tuesday, because although fall has only just started to siphon the green from the leaves, the weekends already see an upturn in residents of the City seeking their Autumn Experience, and the motel's Friday-through-Monday rates reflect this.

You pass the five days before you depart finishing the latest grading for the five sections of Freshman Writing you are dragging through the process of writing a research paper. The focus of your classes is Haunting and Possession, which you had thought would be entertaining enough for both the students and you, but by the fiftieth essay discussing the film adaptation of *The Exorcist* as an expression of parental anxieties over rebellious children, even the prospect of researching an actual instance of the ritual has lost some of its appeal. However, the tenure your book will earn you is sufficient to seat you at your computer after the day's comments have been delivered, sifting the online archives of the *Wiltwyck Daily Freeman*, the *Middletown Times-Herald Record*, and the *Poughkeepsie Journal* for further information on the car accident that occurred on Main Street of the town of Stonington ten years ago, in 1998. (You had just completed your doctoral coursework at Tufts and were putting together a committee for your dissertation. While fraying at the edges, the pattern at the center of your marriage was still recognizable.) The Middletown paper's coverage was most extensive, with one day's article addressing the accident, the next day's the life of Rachel Torino. From this second article, you learn that Rachel Torino, née Follet, was a graduate of SUNY Huguenot, a returning student who had recently completed her degree in elementary education. You also learn that her husband, James, emerged unscathed from the crash

that claimed his wife. A photograph of the couple accompanies the second piece. It shows a short woman with long hair and long bangs smiling widely as she wraps her arms around a man with a broad chest and short, curly hair. Perhaps because it is late and you are tired, you weigh contacting James Torino, e-mailing or phoning him, before rejecting the idea as too much. Even academic research should know some kind of ethical boundaries. You print the photo of the Torinos and slip it into the manila folder in which you keep material relevant to this chapter.

3

On a bright Tuesday morning in early October, you take the train to the rental place, hand your credit card to a young woman with a high ponytail and square glasses whom you almost recognize as a former student, sign and initial the rental agreement in a half-dozen places, and receive the keys to your car. It is a GEO Metro that shade of teal that was popular in the early nineteen-nineties. The sight of it prompts an unexpected spasm of nostalgia in the pit of your stomach. For the first half of 2007, the last great love of your life drove a car like this from Baltimore to Garden City and back again on I-95. You place your overnight bag in the nominal back seat, your briefcase in the front passenger seat, and slot the key in the ignition.

Your trip across town to pick up I-87 goes faster than you had anticipated, and before long you have crossed the Hudson and are speeding through the hills and mountains that shoulder up north of the City. It never has ceased to amaze you that such apparent wilderness, such remoteness and solitude, exist so close to New York’s concrete and steel regularity. As you maneuver the Metro around the high mass of one eighteen-wheeler after another, you recall your first trip to the Hudson Valley. Reassuring yourself that it was only for a year or two, until a better job appeared, you had accepted the position at Queens Community College and immediately been deluged with the preparations for five classes, not to mention arranging the move from Boston to New York. Your marriage was… by then, it was beyond frayed; it was almost completely undone. During a weekend conference in Quebec City, you had spent the night with a graduate student from Oxford, and although the two of you had not actually had sex, it was a sufficient betrayal for you to feel the need to confess it to your husband upon your return. He

had no equivalent trespass with which to wound you, though he angrily declared that he had visited the local strip club twice. That he would accompany you out of Boston was a matter of some doubt. However, when the time came for you to travel to New York to survey prospective apartments, he surprised you by suggesting he could join you, share the driving. (You had your own car, then, a battered Honda Civic.) As it turned out, he drove all the way there and all the way back. You filled two frantic days crisscrossing the City, viewing a total of nineteen apartments. At the beginning of the third day, you selected the place in Garden City, which, though a fifth-floor walk-up, offered more space for (slightly) less money. Your husband appeared happy with the choice—with everything; indeed, it was his suggestion that the two of you take a drive, do a bit of exploring, which led you along the Hudson past Peekskill, to the town of Garrison, across the river from West Point's gray walls. You shared a late lunch at a café and passed a pleasant hour walking the town's sidewalks before returning to the car to head for Boston. Those three days had been lighter than any in your recent past, as if the burden of your combined missteps had been, not so much lifted as shifted, set to the side; although you did not subscribe to any belief in the magical power of a change of scene, as the two of you sped east that night you wondered if perhaps a new place might mean a new chance. For a few days after you were back in Boston, that seemed the case. When your husband proposed that he remain in the old apartment after you had started your new job—in hopes of receiving a better offer for it than you so far had—the idea had sounded reasonable, even responsible. No doubt your suspicions should have been raised by his insistence that you move only your things; though on your more generous days, of which this is one, you can almost credit his motivation as (mostly) practical.

In the years since your marriage's unraveling, you have ventured the Hudson Valley a handful of times, usually in the company of your present lover. Once you rode the Trailways bus to Huguenot—whose exit you must take and which is suddenly ahead on the right—for a conference at the SUNY campus there. In a classroom whose five beige walls were each a different length, you delivered a paper on Sara Gran's *Come Closer* to an audience of two undergraduates and one of the conference organizers.

Afterwards, you spent a couple of hours at one of the local bars in conversation with a writer whose name you cannot remember about the role of horror stories in contemporary culture. You promised to look up his books as soon as you returned home. You did not.

Traffic on Huguenot's Main Street is light. After having kept the speedometer just shy of eighty for the last two hours, you have to concentrate on driving in what feels like slow motion. As far as you can remember, with the exception of a few cosmetic changes, such as a new Japanese noodle restaurant, the town is roughly the same as it was during your last visit, two years ago. You pass through Huguenot quickly and, within the space of another twenty-five minutes spent driving over the ridge that defines the horizon behind the town, are on Route 209 heading into Stonington.

4

Of course you've seen pictures of the Wynkoop Inn online: you've printed a quartet of the best ones, studied them. But the image of a thing is no substitute for the thing itself, and as you pass the Inn on your right your foot relaxes on the gas. Set at the top of a slight rise, the building is a stone box whose size recalls its previous life as a mansion. Its front is traversed by a shallow porch upon which a pair of rocking chairs guards a large wooden door. To either side, a trio of windows flanks the door. Above the porch, a half-dozen dormer windows protrude from the great slope of the Dutch roof. Red, yellow, and white flowers fill spiral beds on the front lawn.

Rachel Torino must have died right around where you are now. Gooseflesh raises the skin on your forearms—an adolescent response, surely, yet there is a second when you can almost hear the scream of tires losing their grip on the road. A honk from the car behind you hurries you forward.

5

To reach the Grand Republic Motel, you turn left at the major intersection in the center of Stonington. In the near distance, the Catskills rise rounded. The motel is a mile along on the right, its white strip of rooms bordered by green pastures from which chocolate brown cows watch you steer into the

parking lot. A short, plump woman whose head is capped by tight, metallic curls takes her time checking you in, peppering the process with questions about you, the reasons for your trip. Although you can't help feeling you're trending toward paranoia, you lie, telling her you're a writer taking a few days off from your latest novel. When this prompts the woman to proclaim herself a great reader, and ask what you write, you gamble on horror fiction, which pays off in the distaste that curdles her expression. Before you can stop yourself, you say that your current project concerns a young academic who visits a small town to investigate reports of an evil statue. Either the woman has no idea what you are referring to or she is remarkably self-controlled—an interpretation of the blankness of her features that seems to take your paranoia into the realm of outright mental illness. You thank her, collect your key and the guide to the region she offers you, and exit her office.

The room you have reserved is clean, the double bed inviting after the drive up, which has left you more drained than you anticipated, your shoulders and neck tight with fatigue. However, the clock is ticking, so you settle for a quick wash and head out. You noticed a bagel place at the turn-off for the motel, to which you go for a plain bagel with tuna salad and a review of the circumstances surrounding the unearthing of the mysterious statue.

6

That said statue was dug up near the Inn's north wall, no one disputes. Work was under way to expand the Inn's outdoor facilities; the plan was for a side exit that would open to a large patio area suitable for wedding receptions and similar occasions. The soil in this region is notoriously damp, a consequence of its high clay content. This complicated the use of the generous lawn around the Inn. A patio, while not as lovely as manicured green grass, was judged a necessary evil. After marking off the area with Margaret Garrick, who appears to have been in charge of such matters, the groundskeeper set to work with his shovel.

This man, Stephen Holland, is still employed tending the Inn's grounds. You find him in one of the outbuildings behind the Inn, wiping the grass shavings from a riding mower. His sweeping gut, the collar of flesh under

his chin, give the impression that his size is all surplus, yet the breadth of his shoulders, the thickness of his biceps, his forearms, indicate that there is more substance to him. In a voice whose accent draws a line between him and the south shore of Long Island, he asks, Something I can help you with? when his eye catches you standing in the doorway.

There is no evading it: you must tell him the reason you have parked the Metro in the small lot beside the Inn and walked back here. You say that you are researching the statue that was excavated on the Inn's grounds in 1998. Lawrence Schmidt has refused to talk to you, and you've been unable to locate Margaret Garrick, so that's brought you to Stephen, who you understand held the actual shovel.

You a reporter? Stephen Holland asks.

Professor, you say, assistant professor in the English department at Queens Community College.

That so? What do you teach?

Freshman writing, mostly, although you get to teach a class in myth and folklore, which is your specialty.

Is that why you're interested in the statue, some kind of modern myth thing?

Actually, yes, you say, unable to keep the surprise from your voice. You're working on a book on Internet narratives—on what you're calling electronic folklore. These are stories you find online that purport to be true but often wander a considerable distance from their source material. A lot of the time, these stories wind up adapting elements of other popular narratives.

Uh huh. This one's what? *The Exorcist?*

You nod. The escalating events, the pair of clergy called in to deal with the matter…

One hand rubbing his beard, Stephen Holland studies you, then says, All right. If you can keep up with him as he performs his duties, he'll answer your questions. There's only one thing he won't talk about, and that's what happened to Mrs. Garrick. She was the one who hired him when he first

came up here, thirty years ago, took a chance on him, and she always did right by him. He figures he owes her that much.

Of course, you say. Would he mind telling you about unearthing the statue? Does he remember the details?

Sure, he says, he remembers that. He removes a rake from the wall to his left and walks out of the shed. You follow him. He'd spent the early part of the morning drive a shovel into ground that was thick as a fuckin brick. Already, he was regretting telling Mrs. Garrick that they didn't need to hire a backhoe, he'd have the place cleared out in a day. It had rained the previous day—thunder and lightning, torrential rain—and the soil was saturated, a goddam swamp. There were clouds of mosquitoes the size of fuckin vampire bats; his arms looked like he had the chicken pox. He was digging next to the Inn, because he thought that maybe the soil might be a little less dense over there, which it seemed like it was, and then the shovel hit something.

Right from the start, Stephen states, he knew it wasn't just a rock. He has stopped at the rear of the lawn, where grass surrenders to trees. He turns the rake over and begins to gather the grass he has mown. Usually, he says, there's a machine that does this—you know, an attachment for the tractor. Like a big garbage bag.

You nod. What happened to it?

It broke, Stephen says, and he hasn't gotten around to fixing it, yet. It's all right: in case you haven't noticed—he slaps his expansive gut—he kind of needs the exercise.

You smile.

Okay, he says, where was he?

The statue—

Yeah. The sound was all wrong for a rock—more high-pitched, almost grainy, if you get what he means. He withdrew the shovel and slid it into the soil slowly, even gently. There was something there, all right, and as he repeated his searching, he saw that whatever was buried there was a good couple-three feet at least. Margaret saw what he was up to and came out to

ask him what was going on. He told her he'd hit something under the ground. Like a pipe? she asked. Uh-uh, he said. I think maybe it's a statue.

Isn't that funny? Stephen says. It could've been a pipe, some kind of ceramic, or it could've been part of an old building, or something left over from the Inn's past, of which there's more than enough, but no, he was pretty sure it was a statue.

Margaret Garrick fetched a shovel from the shed and started to help him—whatever else you could say about her, she was always willing to pitch in and lend a hand. Together, they dug around the object's margins, then, at Margaret's suggestion, they traded their shovels for garden trowels and spent the next hour clearing thick earth from what was, in fact, a statue. When Stephen realized what it portrayed, he took a step back and, although he hadn't seen the inside of a church since his confirmation, crossed himself. Not irreverently, he said, Jesus Christ. Mrs. Garrick's response was more measured: she sat back on her heels, resting her elbows on her knees, and said, Hmmmm.

7

The expression on Stephen Holland's face says that his memory of the statue is undimmed. In answer to your question, he says that he doesn't have any photos of the thing. At the request of Reverend Au Claire, any and all pictures of it in the Inn's possession were gathered and burned. There had been plans to include a photo of the statue in the new brochure for the Inn, but the brochure had not progressed beyond the draft stage, and those drafts were consigned to the fire that Stephen lit in one of the stone barbecues behind the Inn.

You have searched online, but the most that has turned up is a series of images posted in early 2007 of figures excavated on the Greek island of Keros. Forty-five hundred years old, the apparent products of the Cycladic culture that preceded Hellenic civilization, these statues are starkly geometric, inverted triangles with undersized circles for heads. Bulges midway down their fronts apparently represent pregnancy; the archeologists who unearthed these figures speculate that they are images of the mother-goddess whose worship was supplanted by that of Zeus and his offspring.

Every single one of the statues excavated was broken, possibly as a gesture of contempt by adherents of the newer gods.

The simple abstraction of the Keros statues suggests the contemporary as much as the ancient; in this regard, they are the opposite of the three feet of marble Stephen Holland and Margaret Garrick exposed. The sole surviving image of it—a color photograph paper-clipped to a manila envelope in the file cabinet of an art history professor you will visit shortly—shows a work whose realism of form and detail suggests the apex of the Classical Greeks, or of their Renaissance Italian children. The figure is that of a woman, her bare feet on a plain round base. She is wearing a long, sleeveless dress that suggests a toga but that would not look out of place against a number of backdrops. Her plump arms are bent at the elbows, her hands crossed over a belly that swells with a child ready to make its entry into the world. The piece is more than competently sculpted; there is a touch of real art in the stretch of the dress's fabric over the woman's midriff, the thickness of her ankles, the veins raised on the tops of her feet. It is that artistry that lends the statue's other detail so much power. It is headless, deliberately so: the neck shows a cross-section of bone, throat, muscle, blood vessels.

That fuckin thing, Stephen Holland says. Who the fuck carves a statue like that?

8

This same question occurred to Margaret Garrick, who, after helping Stephen to wrestle the sculpture out of its hole and hosing it clean of the remaining dirt, returned to her office at the rear of the Inn and phoned the art department at Penrose College, across the Hudson in Poughkeepsie. Margaret had met Janet Naida at the Stonington Library the previous winter, when the professor had given a talk on the significance of Stonington and its historic Main Street to the work of Annabel Ferris, a sculptor whose 1981 death in a car crash truncated a career of some promise. (Apparently, Ferris was decapitated just up the road from the spot where Rachel Torino died, a coincidence that makes the hairs on the back of your neck bristle.) According to Stephen, the professor drove over the next day and spent about an hour examining the statue—including, he says,

photographing it—only to tell Margaret that a) it wasn't Annabel Ferris's work and b) she couldn't say whose work it was. He gathers that Professor Naida did some more digging, so to speak, after she left, but as far as he knows, she didn't find anything.

He has gathered the grass clippings into a sizable mound that he uses his rake to drive across the yard toward a plot of earth surrounded by a high fence—the vegetable garden, he explains. He'll add this to the compost.

Right, you say. Did he have anything more to do with the statue? Did he see anything?

Nah. Stephen shakes his head. He mounted it in the dining room—Mrs. Garrick was talking about bringing in a professional, but Stephen told her to save her money. It was a more complicated job than he'd anticipated—he swears, nothing connected to that fuckin thing was easy. He had his doubts about putting the statue where people were eating—really, is that what you want to look at while you're having your dinner? But Margaret insisted, the same way she insisted the thing had to go up in the northwest corner, even though the wall there was all pipe and wires. It turned what should have been an afternoon's job into a day and a half of running back and forth to the hardware store. He had to jury-rig this support… anyway, that was the extent of his involvement with the statue, until the very end, after that woman died. He was the one who took it down from the wall and drove it over to Holy Redeemer.

What was that like?

Weird. Stephen opens a gate at one end of the vegetable garden, sweeps the pile of cut grass onto a larger heap there.

You wait.

Stephen combs the grass over the compost. When he is satisfied, he closes the garden gate and sets off for the shed. Once he has hung the rake on the wall and washed and dried his hands and face in a small sink, he says, For a couple-three days, things around here had been *off*. He was friends with Julian, the chef—well, not exactly friends, the guy could be a real douche, but when a big delivery arrived for the kitchen, Stephen didn't mind helping him move things around, and sometimes he'd bum a cigarette off Julian—

the point is, Julian had told him some crazy shit that was supposed to have happened with the statue.

What kind of stuff?

Bizarre stuff, Stephen says. You planning on talking to any of the girls who were working in the dining room?

Yes, you say, Christina Henderson.

Then she can tell you what she saw up close and personal, Stephen says. Suffice it to say, everyone was on edge. There was this feeling in the air—okay, don't go turning this into some kind of Psychic Friends bullshit, but it was like the air was—it was like you could almost hear something, or as if you'd just heard something, and your ears were still ringing with the sound.

What sound was that?

A scream, Stephen says, a woman's scream. And then the accident happened—Jesus, God. Mrs. Garrick was… It was Larry, actually, Larry Schmidt who sought him out to say they were sending the statue over to Holy Redeemer, and was there any way he could impose on Stephen… ?

What did he say?

He said sure, Stephen says.

Wasn't he nervous?

Not really, he says. Maybe a little. He isn't sure what he was. Freaked out, he supposes. It was like, first they'd found this fuckin statue, then all this weird shit happens, then this woman, this pregnant woman, winds up the same as the statue, and right in front of the Inn. Yeah, it was probably coincidence, or mass hysteria, or all of the above, but there are times when coincidence feels like something else, you know? As if you're seeing into the way the world really works, underneath all the science and logic and shit. Whatever—he was only too happy to take the statue someplace else. Hell, if Larry'd asked him to dump the thing in the Hudson, he'd have been happy to do so.

The Inn was pretty much deserted. After the strangeness of the last few days, the guests had decided to seek their accommodations elsewhere. The dining room was dark—with the police and firemen out front… there hadn't seemed much point in opening it. None of the girls had come in; Julian had

been there for a little while, but he was long gone. Larry was at the front desk, but that was mostly because he didn't have anywhere else to be. He'd offered to help Stephen move the statue, but Stephen had declined. He could just imagine the damned thing dropping on Larry's foot.

There's something about a big empty space, Stephen says. It's not the same thing as being outside, in the middle of a field or something. You stand inside it, and you can feel it, the way it holds emptiness inside itself. Know what I mean?

Do you? You nod.

The statue was where it was supposed to be; there was nothing strange about it—beyond the obvious. Stephen had a hand truck with him. He wrestled the sculpture off its perch and lowered it onto the truck. The fuckin thing felt even heavier than it had when he'd hoisted it up there, but that was probably his imagination. Tore the hell out of his back, though. Would've given him the perfect excuse to drop the damned thing, smash it to pieces.

Why didn't he?

He shrugs. Larry had told him it was Margaret who wanted the statue moved to the church. So that was what he did. He carted it out of the Inn, loaded it onto his pickup—more trouble for his back—and drove it the mile and a half to Holy Redeemer. He didn't use Main Street: that wouldn't have been—that wouldn't have been right. Instead, he took the access road. If you drive along beside the outbuildings, you'll find an old road that cuts through the woods over to 213. It isn't more than a couple of ruts in the dirt; a good rain and it's a fuckin bog. That was the route Stephen chose. It's a short ride, he says, but it felt like a fuckin eternity. The moon was—it wasn't full, that would've been too much, but it wasn't far off, and the sky was full of clouds racing across it. One minute, the line of grass in front of him, the rows of trees to either side, would be lit white, the next, the whole scene would fade from view, until all that was left was the stretch of road picked out by his headlights. As the darkness thickened, he drove more slowly: because he was being cautious, he told himself, which was bullshit. He'd taken this road enough times and his truck was big enough that, if he'd wanted to race it, he could have, pitch-blackness or not. It was—

clouds would slide off the moon, and the trees, the grass, would solidify around him, and it all looked different, the tree trunks covered in faces, the grass full of shadows that didn't belong to anything. He had this intense sensation of being watched, Stephen says. Even when his surroundings disappeared again, he could feel something, something keeping track of him. He was never so happy to see a church as he was when he finally pulled up in front of Holy Redeemer.

And? you ask. What happened next?

That's as much as he knows. He unloaded the statue, brought it into the basement, the what-do-you-call-it, undercroft, and that was him.

He hasn't heard anything?

He's heard a ton of shit, Stephen says, most of it exactly that, shit. You'll have to speak to Reverend Au Claire about what came next.

9

Stephen Holland's refusal does not surprise you. You thank him for his time and help and ask if he would be willing to talk to you again, in case you need to check anything with him.

Yeah, sure, he says, and wishes you luck on the rest of your mission.

Back in the Metro, you scribble into your notebook for half an hour, until your hand has cramped with writing so much, so fast. (Why don't you use a tape recorder? your ex-husband once asked you, the question a guise for yet another accusation of your continuing unreasonableness. Though you knew the answer wouldn't matter, you said, Because some people hold back if they know they're being taped. Besides, I have a great memory.) Once the pain has lessened, you call information on your cell. Penrose College's main number brings you into contact with a pleasant woman who connects you to Professor Janet Naida's extension. You are expecting the professor's voicemail and have composed a brief message asking her to call you back, but Janet Naida herself answers the phone. You can imagine how you sound, tripping over your tongue, despite which, you manage to convey to Professor Naida that you are researching the statue about which Margaret Garrick called her ten years ago, and you were hoping you might speak to

her about it. The professor sounds genuinely surprised by the subject of your call, and while she insists that she is extremely busy, consents to a brief interview—her word—in an hour and a half, between classes. Do you know where her office is?

You do not. To be honest, you're not sure what the best route to Penrose is.

Professor Naida provides you with detailed directions that take you from the Wynkoop Inn, over the Wiltwyck-Rhinecliff Bridge, and down the east shore of the Hudson with a minimum of difficulty; in fact, the most challenging part of your journey is navigating the parking lots of Penrose College in search of the strip of blacktop set aside for visitors. Your quest leads you among the college's Gothic-revival buildings, its wide green lawns, its students diligently dressed to deny their affluence, and though you know it should not, the sight of all this calls to mind the utilitarian box where you teach, low-budget construction pretending to be Frank Lloyd Wright, its cramped patches of grass, its students dressed to the aspirations pop culture has bestowed on them. The taste that fills your mouth grows more bitter as you walk the hall to Professor Naida's office, past flyers advertising lectures, concerts, readings. The professor answers her door, and the black pantsuit-pink blouse combination she is wearing—obviously purchased at one of the boutiques that dot the streets around Penrose—makes your own gray slacks and white blouse—on sale at J. C. Penney—seem like jeans and a T-shirt.

10

Professor Naida confines her blond hair in a tight bun whose severity is matched by the sharp lines of her high cheekbones and almost vulpine jaw. She welcomes you into her high-ceilinged office much as you expect she would a student come for a conference, directing you to a wooden chair while seating herself in a large leather armchair positioned beside the room's single tall window. To her right, a table that resembles an overly ambitious stool supports a hardcover copy of her book on Annabel Ferris (which, she tells you, was the principal source for the film starring Gwyneth Paltrow), and a small sculpture of the artist's head (which, she volunteers, is

only a copy of the artist's last self-portrait; although, she adds, she saw and briefly held the original during her consultant work for the film).

After you have thanked her for agreeing to speak to you, but before you can pose your first question, Professor Naida declares that she should start by telling you that she does not know what artist carved the statue that was hauled out of the earth at the Wynkoop Inn. When she agreed to drive over to inspect the piece, she already was ninety-nine percent certain that it had nothing to do with Annabel Ferris. Anna, as the professor calls her, rarely worked at anything so (comparatively) large; though not strictly speaking a miniaturist, her preference was for the intimate. Her more substantial sculptures could be counted on one hand without need of all its digits, and since those pieces were accounted for, the chances of this new statue being a hitherto undocumented work were so slender as to be almost nil. But Anna had lived the last decade of her life less than a mile from the spot where the sculpture had been discovered, and almost nil was not the same as nil, and this was what put Professor Naida behind the wheel of her Saab for a trip across the river. She can't deny it: the professor hoped that she might be the one to identify a hitherto unknown piece by her favorite artist.

From the moment she saw it, though, Professor Naida knew the statue was not one of Anna's. To begin with, the technique was wrong. While Anna's style has been described as a return to realism, it is a realism that is very much aware of the abstract movements that preceded it. Anna was not afraid to bend in the direction of the abstract, the geometric, if doing so would strengthen the work at hand. In comparison, whoever had sculpted this statue acted as if the developments of the last hundred-plus years had not happened. It was the style of a good deal of religious, i.e. Catholic, work, in which the need for recognition of the figure being represented outweighs aesthetic considerations. Nonetheless, the professor must admit, the skill on display in this piece was of a higher level—a significantly higher level—than much of what you find in your local church.

Yes, she was disappointed; how could she not be? The more she studied the statue, the more the evidence that it was not Anna's work accumulated. In addition to the matter of style, there was that of subject. Anna favored representations of herself and, somewhat later, her infant son. While the last two of her larger sculptures were of herself in the closing months of

pregnancy, they showed her dressed in sweatpants and a T-shirt, hair up, seated cross-legged in one, on a chair in the other. Anna's life frequently had been violent, starting with abuse at the hands of her father and continuing with abuse at the hands of her first agent/lover, but she kept her art free of it. When she entered the studio, Professor Naida says, Anna deliberately left that part of her life at the door. For her, art was a place of calm. That was absolutely essential to her vision. The kind of savagery you find in Margaret Garrick's statue is completely out of keeping with Anna's work. She will admit, though, to being struck by a coincidence: Anna's final series of self-portraits possess the approximate dimensions to have served as the sculpture's head. The angle at which she ended the neck of her second-to-last self-portrait is uncannily close to that of the statue.

But coincidence is not evidence of conspiracy. The final nail in the coffin, so to speak, was the statue's material. Throughout her life, Anna struggled for money; predictably, it wasn't until after her death that her art began to attract the kind of attention—critical and financial—that would have allowed her to sculpt with the quality of materials she longed for. The block of marble from which the headless pregnant woman was carved was about as fine a grade as you could buy; the professor is reasonably certain it's Parian marble, which comes from a Greek island and would have been hopelessly beyond Anna's budget.

Just to be sure, though, Professor Naida re-opened her archive of Anna's personal writing and searched for anything that might hint at a connection between her and the statue. There are large gaps in the record of Anna's life—especially when she was working, she tended to ignore her correspondence and skimp on her journal entries. This was the case at the time of her death, when she was engaged in her last series of self-portraits. A week before she was killed, Anna mentioned dreaming of the Mother, but it was common for her mother to appear in Anna's dreams, particularly when she was creating. Had Rodney Siece been alive, the professor might have contacted him—he was her second agent, and with her during the last days of her life. In fact, he was in the car with her when she was killed; he emerged from the accident unhurt. Unfortunately, Rodney was dead. After Anna's demise, Rodney, obviously traumatized by the experience, took to

alcohol and Valium in generous doses. Within six months, he, too, was gone.

When you have the chance to ask Professor Naida if she has any thoughts, speculations, as to who might have been responsible for the statue, she shakes her head and admits that she investigated possible answers to that question. To reduce long days in the library to a single sentence, she learned nothing. None of Annabel Ferris's contemporaries who were associated with this part of New York—Brandner, Fox, Hall—had worked in this style, so the professor expanded her search, looking as far back as the eighteen-eighties, only to reach another dead end. While the area has seen more than its fair share of artists, some lifelong residents, others passing through, none produced anything remotely like this. For a short time, Professor Naida was intrigued by a minor detail from local history: during the nineteen-teens, when the Ashokan Reservoir was being constructed a few miles from the Inn, Italian stonemasons were brought in for some of the work on the dam and other structures. Apparently, the employment paid well, enough to afford a piece of fine marble, and if one of those workers had decided to settle in Stonington… The problem was, she could locate no record of any such figure, which you would assume there would have to have been had he turned out other pieces with the skill of this one. Apparently, though, whoever carved this statue laid down his hammer and chisel after completing it. Why he buried it next to the Inn, she cannot say. It strikes her as a gesture of renunciation, Prospero destroying his books.

While you are not certain what significance to ascribe to the statue's burying, the professor's interpretation immediately strikes you as wrong. You bury what is precious, treasure or the loved dead. You might consign to the earth that which you fear. If you are renouncing something, wouldn't you want the act to be more definitive? Wouldn't you smash the statue, make sure there was nothing left of it? However, you do not argue the point with Professor Naida, who has risen from her chair and turned to a file cabinet behind her. Apparently, your interview/lecture is done. Standing, you thank the professor for her time. She has withdrawn a manila folder from the drawer she has opened. Here, she says, she has something for you. She crosses the office, holding out the folder. A photograph has been paper-

clipped to it. There is a color copy of the picture beneath it, to which the professor says you are welcome.

11

Despite all the discussion that has been devoted to it, the mental image of it you have constructed, the sight of the actual statue startles you, causes you to breathe in sharply, as if you've stepped out into a subzero day with no jacket on. Thanking Professor Naida again, you slide the copy from under the original and insert it into your notebook, which feels heavier for the addition.

For a moment, you consider asking the professor if she has heard anything of the events subsequent to her visit. In her office, though, with its tall bookcases, its framed photographs of her with Gwyneth Paltrow, its arts-and-crafts desk, such questions seem glorified gossip. You thank Professor Naida a third time, and depart.

12

Since you are on the other side of the Hudson, you flip through your notebook to Christina Henderson's number. Before you have finished re-introducing yourself to her, Christina says that she remembers you and yeah, she remembers she said she'd talk to you if you were around. She's at work—she manages a restaurant called Archipelago—but the doors won't open for a couple of hours, so if you can come right now, she supposes she can take a break for a little while. She gives you directions to the side street in Rhinebeck where the restaurant is located, and after a hurried ten minutes writing down the high points of your conversation with Professor Naida, you are on your way back up Route 9.

13

Archipelago is a low building at the end of a short, narrow road. Christina Henderson meets you at its front door dressed in a white silk blouse and black slacks. A pair of steep high heels makes her even taller than she already is. The *chignon* into which she has drawn the dark curls of her hair

gives her a youthful air at odds with the bags under her eyes and the lines incised on her forehead. Though holding open the restaurant door, Christina asks you if you would mind speaking with her while she takes her cigarette break. Even as you say, Of course, she pushes past you, on her way to the rear of the building. There, a single chair to which some wit has taped a sign reading SMOKERS HELL sits beside a plastic bucket full of sand from which the ends of a carton's worth of cigarettes protrude. From the right pocket of her slacks, Christina fishes a cigarette, which she ignites with the lighter she withdraws from her left pocket. She is not one of those smokers whose first draw causes her shoulders to relax, her posture to ease; instead, she hugs her free arm across herself, looks off into the trees behind the restaurant, and asks what it is you want to know.

When you say you're researching the statue, she says she didn't think anything of it. Yvonne—one of the other girls—was a wreck from the start, completely freaked out by the thing, but as far as Christina was concerned, it was an old statue, and old statues usually looked like that. The Venus de Milo, right? Granted, those statues lost their arms or whatever through the passage of time, whereas this headless woman started that way, but you understand what she's saying, right?

In reply to your nod, Christina says that things went wrong almost immediately. The first couple of nights, it was small stuff: Yvonne dropped an entire tray; Jo—the other girl—spilled someone's soup in their lap; Christina lost her grip on two successive bottles of wine. None of it was anything that didn't happen once in a while, but for all of it to occur so close together felt… weird.

After that, the situation sped downhill. Several customers seated near the statue heard a baby crying, faintly but persistently, and after listening to the sound for anywhere from five to twenty minutes, waved one of the waitresses over and suggested, with varying degrees of good humor, that someone needed to attend to that child. One pair of diners, a flashy young couple up from the City, announced that this place was costing them far too much to have their dinner spoiled by a kid whose mother couldn't look after it and insisted that the Inn pick up the tab for a meal at another, quieter establishment.

You ask what response they received. Christina says she was all for telling them to take a flying fuck at a rolling donut, but Mrs. Garrick worked something out with them.

Were there any children at the Inn?

Christina shakes her head. It wasn't unheard of for parents to bring their kids to the Inn, but they tended to be older, at least five or six. Unless there was a wedding or other big celebration, in which case you might see an influx of babies. And no, there weren't any weddings going on when the complaints started to roll in.

What did she do?

The end of her cigarette flares. The first couple of times, she says, none of us knew what the diners were talking about, so we smiled, and nodded, and reassured them someone would take care of it. The customer's always right, you know? It seemed to satisfy them—most of them.

Did any of you hear anything?

Yvonne—at least, she said she did, Christina says, the tone of her voice a clear indication of her opinion of Yvonne's claims. At night, after the dining room had closed and the three of us were sitting around with Julian, the chef, sharing a bottle of wine, this far-away expression would come over Yvonne's face—Christina imitates it: eyes focused on the distance, face slack, mouth contracted. She'd wait until the rest of us noticed she'd stopped talking, and then she'd ask if we heard it. Christina's voice becomes breathy as she says, Oh, poor little thing. You want your mama, don't you? Where is she? She puts her cigarette to her mouth. Honestly.

Was that all?

Christina blows a jet of smoke. Not hardly. The crying continued—more importantly, the complaints about the crying continued, until Christina spoke to Mrs. Garrick. Whether she made the connection to the statue, Christina can't say; although, really, how could she not? There was a vent in the floor near the statue; Margaret convinced herself that that was the source of the sound everyone was hearing. She had Stephen Holland close it, and as far as she was concerned, that was that.

Was it?

Customers stopped complaining, Christina says, but that may have had as much to do with the fact that she and the other girls avoided seating them near the statue. Not to mention, word had gotten around, and some diners requested tables away from it.

You ask if anyone left because of what they heard, or heard of. Christina says, No, not then. So long as the freaky stuff was confined to that part of the Inn, customers were more curious than anything. Maybe not curious enough to want to sit next to the statue, but enough to get a charge out of being in the same room as it. You know how people are. Anyway, a couple of days after the vent was shut, the statue bled.

Bled?

During Saturday dinner. The dining room was packed. She had seated a couple beside the statue. She had to; there was no room. They were young and didn't seem to mind. After Christina set their main courses in front of them, before she could ask if they needed anything else and express her hope that they would enjoy their meal, there was a noise—like a balloon losing its air—and something sprayed all over Christina and the couple. For a moment, she couldn't see, because whatever it was had gotten in her eyes. She wiped them, and her fingers came away red. There was red all over the place: her blouse, the table, the meals, the diners. And the smell, like raw steak. Christina was still trying to understand what had just happened when the man at the table raised one hand to his mouth and pointed to the statue with the other. She turned and saw the blood bubbling out of the statue's neck like water from a water fountain. Above it, the ceiling and wall were dripping red from the jet of blood that had hissed up from the statue. While Christina watched the blood spilling over the marble neck slow from a torrent to a stream, the woman at the table turned around and, seeing the statue, let loose a scream like you hear in a cheesy horror movie. That did it—the diners nearest the statue, who'd been holding their collective breaths at the spectacle unfolding next to them, bolted from the dining room. In turn, their flight cleared the rest of the place. One woman, a doctor, came over to help, only to retreat when she saw the scene up close.

Christina stabs out her cigarette, consults her watch, decides she has time for another. The first customers won't show up for an hour and a half, she

says, though she really should wrap this up. There are things she still has to do.

You understand, you say. But you have to ask what happened after that… incident.

Everybody left, Christina says, immediately correcting herself, Well, not everybody. Maybe half the people who were present at dinner had checked out by morning. The rest were gone within a couple of days, after they met *her.*

Her?

She doesn't know what to call her. The woman from the statue. Its subject.

14

The first ones to see her were a pair of lawyers up from the City—early middle-age, total power couple. They didn't arrive till the morning after the mess in the dining room, so they had no clue what they'd checked into. Christina had been up past midnight helping Margaret Garrick to wipe blood off the statue, the wall, the ceiling; to clear the tables of their plates, their cups, their silverware; to gather the tablecloths into two piles, one for those with the usual stains, another for those spattered and smeared with blood; to mop the floor. In gratitude, Margaret had given her the next day off, which meant she wasn't there when—

You're sorry, but you have to interrupt. How, you ask, did Margaret respond to blood pouring out of the statue she had unearthed?

Christina pauses. When she speaks, it is in measured tones. Margaret wasn't in the dining room while all hell was breaking loose; although she isn't sure, Christina thinks she was in her office. By the time the screams and shouts brought her running, there was a crowd of upset guests to deal with, which she spent the next couple of hours doing. Where a complimentary bottle of wine from the cellar would soothe jangled nerves, Yvonne or Jo ran to fetch and deliver it with an opener and a pair of glasses. Where wine was insufficient, Margaret offered what she could, from a meal at one of the other restaurants on Main Street to a full refund with her sincerest apology. She managed to hold onto about half the guests, which

Christina thought wasn't too bad, considering the circumstances. Anyway, when she walked into the dining room to survey the damage, you could see how drawn her face was. She stared at the statue for a long time. Christina was waiting for her to say something, to ask for her version of events. What she said, though, when she did speak, was, Let's clean up.

That was it?

That was it. You could tell she had a million questions—you could feel her dying to ask them. But if she did, if she heard what Christina had to say, then whatever explanation she had provided the guests, whatever rationalization, would snap, leaving Margaret to confront something outrageous, impossible. She didn't ask, and Christina, who was trying to wrap her mind around what she'd seen, didn't offer. Instead, they made small talk about the weather, gossiped about the guests, the other staff. It was just as well. If she'd described the blood rushing from the statue's neck down its body, she would have started screaming, herself.

15

Back to the Vanderhoffs—that was the couple's name, the first ones who saw *her.* They had booked the Suffolk room (all the Inn's rooms were named after New York counties). To reach this one, you climbed the stairs to the second floor, turned right at the top, and walked down the hall to where it T-junctioned the narrow corridor that crossed the front of the house. There, you turned left. At the end of the corridor, there was a door on your left. You opened it, walked a short hallway, and the door to Suffolk was on your left. The night they arrived, the Vanderhoffs were on their way out to dinner—the Inn's dining room hadn't reopened yet—and as they stood outside their door, fiddling with the lock, they noticed something at the other end of the hall. Although the sky wasn't completely dark, the hall's only window was heavily draped, so that the space was dim, thick with shadows. At first, Mrs. Vanderhoff thought it was a trick of the light, but Mr. Vanderhoff agreed that there was something or someone there. She was on the verge of calling hello when the figure slid forward—that was the way they described it, she slid toward them—and they saw that it was missing its head.

For a moment, they were frozen, watching the headless woman gain more definition as she moved closer to the window's weak light, and then Mr. Vanderhoff was jamming a key into the door lock, unable to understand why it refused to fit until he realized it was the key to his Acura and began searching his pants for the room key, which he'd had in his hand a second ago. Mrs. Vanderhoff was looking at the open wound of the woman's neck, the blood that stenciled her skin and snaked the neckline of her pale, sleeveless dress. Mr. Vanderhoff couldn't find the key. Mrs. Vanderhoff was telling him to hurry, hurry up, for Christ's sake, hurry up, she's almost here, which the woman was, she had passed in front of the window, she was ten feet away from them, less. They could hear something, a high-pitched sound neither could identify. Mr. Vanderhoff still couldn't find the key. Mrs. Vanderhoff had backed up against him, was pressing herself into him. The woman was an arm's length away. Mrs. Vanderhoff could see the ruin of the woman's neck, the way her dress belled out around the great curve of her belly. Mr. Vanderhoff was cursing, a litany of fucks. The woman was right beside them. A fine mist of blood filled the air. Mrs. Vanderhoff closed her eyes as it sprayed her face, the hands she raised to shield herself; Mr. Vanderhoff felt it haze the back of his neck. His fingers closed on the little metal outline of Suffolk County to which the room key was chained; he yanked it from his pocket so hard the rest of its contents rained on the carpet. Mrs. Vanderhoff had turned her head to the side, her hands continuing to present what defense they could to the cloud of blood. The key shunked in; Mr. Vanderhoff threw open the door; Mrs. Vanderhoff's feet caught his and they fell into the room. Her elbow drove into his side, and he was momentarily without breath. Mrs. Vanderhoff scrambled away from where he lay gasping to the other side of the bed. Mr. Vanderhoff was aware of something wet falling on his cheek, his forehead, but by the time he forced himself to focus on the doorway, it was empty.

16

Despite her insistence that she must return to work, Christina has lit a third cigarette. I know, she says, how could I possibly know all this, right?

You nod.

They told me themselves, she says. Although she was not in the least inclined to return to it, she had decided to come into the Inn that evening, after all. Turned out she liked the prospect of staying alone in her apartment to dwell on what she'd witnessed even less than returning to the scene of the crime, so to speak. With the dining room closed, there wouldn't be much for her to do, but maybe Julian could use help with the kitchen maintenance stuff. It took her a while to get ready, which meant that she walked into the Inn just as the Vanderhoffs were walking out. Christina recognized the pair and smiled at them, because even though the guy gave off a creepy, I'm-undressing-you-with-my-eyes vibe, they were good tippers, and as long as his hands didn't try to follow his eyes, she could fake niceness. But this time, the two of them looked…

Like they'd seen a ghost?

Shellshocked, Christina says. Traumatized. As if they'd been in the middle of a horrible accident.

You stare at her. That's an interesting choice of words.

She starts to ask what you mean, then her cheeks redden. Jesus. She plunges her cigarette into the sandbucket, stands. She's sorry, but this has taken too long as it is…

Wait, you say, stepping in front of her. What happened with the Vanderhoffs?

Christina stops. They told me, she says. Standing in the front hall, spots of blood visible on their hair, their ears where they'd missed with the washcloth, the couple opened their mouths and the story came pouring out. Christina was almost as surprised by the intimacy of their tone as she was by what they were saying. Once they were finished, they took the bags they hadn't bothered setting down out the front door and did not return.

Had they told anyone else?

They told everybody else, Christina says, everyone they met, from Margaret Garrick to Yvonne to a couple checking in. It was like each new person set the counter back to zero.

How did Margaret Garrick react?

You have to understand, it wasn't only the Vanderhoffs telling their tale of terror to her: it was pretty much all the guests left at the Inn. She—the woman, the headless woman—appeared throughout the Inn, in the halls, in the rooms, in one old guy's bathroom. Christina thinks the Vanderhoffs were the first, but the question's academic. Within a couple of hours of their departure, the rest of the Inn was empty.

17

What about, you begin, but Christina shakes her head and says, No, she isn't going to talk about… the next day. She's sorry, but she's said as much as she's comfortable with and anyway—moving around you—her break is over.

You half run to keep up with her. As her hand is about to close on the handle to the restaurant's front door, you say, Did you see her? Did the woman appear to you?

The handle in her grip, her arm tensed, Christina hesitates, considering the tips of her shoes for one-Mississippi, two-Mississippi, three-Mississippi before letting her arm drop and turning to you. Her face unreadable, she crosses her arms. You are unsure if she intends her expression to be your answer and are on the verge of thanking her for her time, when she says, That night—the night everyone left. In the dining room. She'd been in the kitchen for the last couple of hours with Julian, who didn't really need her help but had put her to work, anyway, checking their stocks, fetching what they were low on from the pantry, preparing more of the house salad dressing, the cinnamon-apple ice cream, emptying a bottle of red one oversized glass at a time. He wasn't much of a talker, Julian, and he had not objected when Christina switched on the tiny transistor radio he kept on the counter next to the refrigerator. The reception was terrible; the only station that would come in clearly was the public radio station out of Wiltwyck. Christina wasn't the biggest fan of public radio, but they were playing classic jazz—not that experimental stuff: Louis Armstrong and Ella Fitzgerald. The blat of Louis's trumpet rolled off the steel countertops, while Ella's girlish voice found the kitchen's high ceiling and corners. It was almost enough to make Christina cheerful, as if the blood that had

sprayed from the statue had been a waking dream, the Vanderhoffs' story an elaborate joke.

Except… she'd had this feeling. She couldn't say since when. Maybe she'd awakened with it that morning. Or maybe it had been there after the blood in the dining room. Or maybe, the more aware of it she became, the more she realized it had been there for some time, now, ever since Margaret and Stephen Holland had exposed the statue. Whatever—it was as if she were on the verge—it was like in the movies, when they show something terrible happening, yes, an accident, there's a second immediately before one car smashes into another when all the sound seems to get sucked out of the air and what you have is this pause, this negative space that you can hear. That was what she was feeling as she pushed open the kitchen door and stepped into the dining room, balancing a tray of freshly cleaned water glasses for the three tables at the back of the room. The glasses already on the tables weren't that bad—they were fine, really, but replacing them was one more way to keep busy.

It took until she was halfway through the second table, which was the big round one, eight settings, for Christina to notice *her.* She looked up, and there the headless woman was, seated at one of the small tables along the south wall, her back to Christina. There was blood everywhere: running down the chair, her neck, spreading across the back of her white dress, sprayed up the wall, puddled on the dishes in front of her, at the bottom of her water glass, weighting the purple and yellow flowers leaning from the vase at the table's center. As soon as Christina saw her, she could smell her, her blood, the red reek of it, like biting tinfoil. There was more—there was something on her plate, a scarlet mound that Christina knew the moment she laid her eyes on she did not want to see any clearer but that she could not stop her feet from carrying her toward. She couldn't understand what she was looking at—her brain refused the task—and then her brain had no choice, because she was standing next to the woman, staring down at the table, and she saw—there was—the—

Christina's hand is over her mouth, her eyes liquid with tears. When you ask her what she saw, she shakes her head, turns, and is inside Archipelago, whose door whunks as she locks it behind her.

Almost as surprised by her action as by her narrative, you approach the door. Its smoky panes reveal little of the space beyond, a bench, perhaps, at right angles to a coat rack. You search the walls to either side of the door for a bell, buzzer, but find nothing. You consider tapping on the glass, but can't decide if that would be pushing things too far. Sudden motion on the other side of the door, a pair of legs striding toward you, trousers, men's shoes, hurries you back, toward the parking lot. You feel but cannot actually see someone watching you from the front door as you duck into the Metro. Although desperate to open your notebook and begin writing, you decide it will be more prudent to do so away from the restaurant.

18

As it turns out, the first quiet place you find is the parking lot of the McDonald's into which you pull once you have crossed over the Wiltwyck-Rhinecliff Bridge (which, you suppose, from this direction should be the Rhinecliff-Wiltwyck Bridge). A quick trip to the drive-through window brings you a fish sandwich, large fries, and a small Coke, not your preferred dinner menu, but sufficient to satisfy the hunger that has overtaken you on the drive back from Archipelago. Sandwich in one hand, pen in the other, notebook balanced on your knees, you record everything you can of your conversation with Christina Henderson.

Once you have finished your notes and your meal, you page through your notebook until you arrive at the number for Holy Redeemer Episcopal Church. It is not too late; perhaps you can fit a meeting with Reverend Au Claire into your day. Somewhat to your surprise, the Reverend answers the office phone at the church herself. Her tone is pleasant enough until you identify yourself, when her words lose several degrees of warmth. Yes, she says, she remembers you, and she would expect you to have remembered her telling you that she had said everything she was going to.

On the phone, you say.

Excuse me?

The Reverend's exact words were that she had said as much as she could on the phone, you remind her. You're here to speak to her in person.

Currently, you're sitting in the parking lot of the McDonald's next to the Wiltwyck Mall. If the Reverend would like, you can stop over tonight.

No, Reverend Au Claire says, she meets with the parish book club in an hour.

Tomorrow?

The priest sighs.

You can come over first thing in the morning—

In the afternoon, she says. One o'clock.

That would be fine, you say. Thank you.

19

On the drive back to Stonington, you decide to stop at the town library, the site of Professor Naida's long-ago lecture. Located a few hundred yards up and across Main Street from the Wynkoop Inn, the library is a more modest structure, one of the stone houses favored by the Dutch settlers of this area, to which has been added a pair of extensions, a long room at the rear, and a shorter room on the left. The main entrance is to the right, at the end of a short flagstone walk bordered by flowerbeds crowded with tall white and purple plants. Past a bulletin-board quilted with flyers for community activities and organizations, the check-out desk stretches along the wall to your right. Seated behind it, a young woman with strong features and a head of long, thick brown hair leans over a book from whose pages she does not look up until you are standing in front of her and clear your throat. Still focused on whatever scene they have been reading, her large brown eyes take a moment to register you. When they do, she shakes her head and apologizes, explaining that she was caught up in this book.

That's all right, you say. What book is it?

In answer, the young woman tilts the volume up so that you can see the cover: *A Good and Happy Child.* I've never read this before, she says.

How is it? you ask.

Pretty wild. She bookmarks her page and closes the novel. What can she help you with?

You're wondering what the library has in the way of local history.

Like, the town, or do you mean the county?

The town, you say.

Honestly, the librarian says, we don't have much. There are a couple of books on the state history shelf that mention Stonington, but they don't say very much, only that the town was founded by Huguenots who moved to the other side of Frenchman's Mountain to get away from the English. The library has a selection of local newspapers from the 1890s—someone donated them a few years ago. What is it you're trying to find out about?

There was a statue that was on display at the Wynkoop Inn about ten years ago—you're researching that.

The librarian's eyes widen. You mean the Bloody Mother?

You aren't sure, you say. This was a statue of a pregnant woman—

Who's headless, right?

That's right. Has she seen it?

No, the librarian says, she was in middle school when the statue was up. One of her friends' older sisters worked at the Inn, and she told them stories —

Is that so? Does she mind you asking what those stories were?

Crazy stuff. The statue was supposed to have bled, especially if a pregnant woman was standing next to it. Apparently, this one woman went into labor right there, and when the baby was born, it had a red ring all the way around its neck. And of course, there was the woman who was killed on Main Street. She was, like, super-pregnant, and she was in a car accident that cut her head clean off, right in front of the Inn. The story goes that, if you stand in front of a mirror in a darkened room and say Bloody Mother three times, she'll appear behind you.

The woman who was killed, or the statue? Or the woman the statue was carved of?

Huh, the librarian says. She always assumed it was the woman who died on Main Street, but now that you mention it, she's not sure.

What was supposed to happen to you if you saw her?

She doesn’t know, the librarian says, adding that she never asked. The prospect of seeing that figure behind her seemed terrible enough on its own. Maybe you died of fright.

There were other stories, too, the librarian says. Urban legends, right? Except this place isn’t so urban. Every year, on the anniversary of the accident that killed that woman, a trail of bloody footprints appears in front of the Wynkoop Inn, all the way from the spot on the road where it happened to the front door. They don’t fade out or anything; they have to be washed away. She hasn’t seen them, herself, but she knows a girl who worked there and saw them two years in a row. The librarian’s also known people who claim to have seen a headless woman standing by the side of the road when they drove past the Inn late at night—one guy even swore she appeared in the back seat of his car—but that sounds pretty crazy. As if the rest of it doesn’t, she laughs.

Pretty crazy, you say.

20

A brief inspection of the state history shelf confirms the librarian’s prediction as to the relevance of its materials. On your way back out, the librarian waves you over and, as you approach the front desk, holds out a sheet of paper to you. This is Constance Braddon’s number, she says. Mrs. Braddon’s the town historian. She might know something about the statue.

You thank her. There is another number written below the historian’s. You point to it. What’s this one?

The librarian blushes. That’s mine, she says. In case you want to talk or anything.

21

From the library’s parking lot, you call Constance Braddon’s number. As you expected, the town historian says that it is too late for her to see you, tonight, but if you can stop over first thing tomorrow morning, she can spare you an hour. Your appointment with her set, you consider the number written below hers. Your first and so far only relationship with a woman

took place three years ago, when what you had thought was a friendly drink at a local bar with a woman from payroll ended in a tangle of sweaty sheets on her bed. You had long considered yourself cosmopolitan in matters of sexuality, but nonetheless were somewhat surprised at how comfortable you were with the whole thing. Concerned to minimize gossip, the two of you were discreet to a fault, which stoked the intensity of the affair. Perhaps that was why it burned out as quickly as it did. In three months, she was declaring your relationship over, and while you sometimes ached for the physical side of it, there hadn't been enough else between the two of you for you to feel all that upset. Although your subsequent lovers have been men, you have not closed off the possibility of another woman should the right one appear. Is that what this is? Has the entire purpose of your trip been nothing more than an excuse for you to meet the next great love of your life? It's a romantic notion, but so what? At the very least, calling the number might lay the groundwork for a future relationship.

In the end, though, you close your phone and start the car. As one of your old boyfriends used to say, Sex makes you late for class, not to mention for early-morning appointments with the town historian. You fold the paper and tuck it in amongst your notes. There is nothing to stop you calling the librarian once you're home. Even if you don't, it is nice to have felt desire stirring in you, to have known yourself the cause of desire in another.

22

In your room at the Great Republic Motel, you switch on your laptop and connect to the motel's wi-fi. You are tired—what you think of as grown-up tired, the fatigue that attaches to you over the course of the day and weighs you down at the end of it. Nonetheless, you connect to Google and type Annabel Ferris's name into the search bar. It takes 0.12 seconds for the search engine to return approximately 420,000 responses. Wikipedia leads the way, followed by the official site for the Gwyneth Paltrow film and the site for Janet Naida's book on Ferris. Below the top responses, a half-dozen thumbnail pictures line up under the heading, "Images of Annabel Ferris." The first and fourth are of Ferris in profile, her head craned forward. The second and third show Gwyneth Paltrow staring off to the left, her lips parted, her hair hanging in the chop that seemed to draw as much

commentary as her performance. The last two photos are close-ups of marble faces. You click on the image furthest to the right, which opens a window showing the marble portrait of a woman's head in three-quarter profile. The large, rounded nose and the chin, jutting forward slightly as if the lower teeth are overlapping the upper, mark the face as Annabel Ferris's; the subscript to the picture identifies it as her Self-Portrait #3. You've seen this piece before. As part of your preparations for this trip, you sought all images of all of Ferris's sculpture. This time, it isn't only that you notice the sharp angle at which the base of the neck has been cut—not an exact match for the headless statue, but not too far off it—but that you're struck by the style in which the self-portrait was executed, something approaching classical Greek or Roman, the hair lying close to the head in tight ringlets, the features serene, the eyes blanks.

23

After the day you've had, the stories you've heard, your dreams should be full of headless women, ghostly voices delivering cryptic warnings about the Bloody Mother. If they are, their contents are not substantial enough either to disturb your sleep or to remain with you the next morning, when you roll over to check the room's digital clock and realize you've overslept and are on the verge of being late for your appointment with the town historian. That you are able to shower, rush through a coffee and bagel at the corner bagel shop, and pull into the historian's driveway only five minutes behind schedule must count as some variety of minor miracle. The house you hurry toward is a modest two-story Colonial whose white siding is speckled green with mold, an appropriate-looking residence for the caretaker of local memory. As you clump up the front stairs, Constance Braddon opens the front door.

Petite, her dark brown hair streaked with gray, the town historian wears a navy skirt, white blouse, and navy sweater unbuttoned at top and bottom. A pair of reading glasses magnifies her eyes behind clouds of scratches. You're here, she says.

Yes, you say, unsure if five minutes' tardiness is sufficient to warrant an apology. Already, though, she has turned and is leading you into the house.

There is something vaguely maternal about her; you would not be surprised if she offered you a cup of tea, a biscuit. But she does not mention water, let alone anything hot.

Mrs. Braddon, as she introduces herself, confesses to a certain curiosity concerning the sculpture's origin; although, she adds, she is as interested in its having been buried. While she sweeps heaps of paper to one side so that she can seat you at the scuffed dining room table where she says she does her real work—the upstairs office is more for storage—Mrs. Braddon asks you if you are familiar with the practice of burying a statue of St. Joseph in the yard of a house you wish to sell? It comes from the Catholics, the Italian Catholics, to be specific, so it may have as much to do with Italian culture as Catholic tradition. You know the story about the founding of Rome, yes? Not Romulus and Remus, no, the story about the workmen digging the foundations of the city who unearthed a bloody head—a sculpture, you understand, of a man's head. (Does Virgil mention it?) The workers were concerned the head might be a bad omen, a perfectly reasonable concern, until someone—Mrs. Braddon can't remember his name—declared the bloody sculpture a good omen, and that appears to have satisfied everyone. Considering Roman history, though, perhaps those workers' fears were justified.

You clear your throat and ask Mrs. Braddon her opinion of Professor Naida's theory that the statue was buried as an act of renunciation on the part of its maker. Mrs. Braddon nods and says that, while this is hardly her area of expertise—she's an amateur historian, not a psychologist—this seems an awfully elaborate way to give something up. Of course, such elaborateness could be the point, to underscore the significance of what's being renounced. All the same, it strikes her that you might bury a statue of someone if the person herself were unavailable: if the body had been lost at sea, say, or if you were separated from her by a great distance. You might employ such a substitute to help yourself grieve; though the statue's missing head raises certain questions, she knows. While this might be the way in which the sculpture's original died, why would the artist choose to represent her this way? Usually, we portray the beloved dead in a more idealized fashion, at least more completely, which raises the possibility that this model was not-so-beloved, after all, that the piece might have been… call it

an act of aggression. If this were the case, then interring it could be a sign of changed sentiments on the part of the artist. On the other hand, burial has been used as a sign of contempt, out of sight, out of mind and all that. Were the sculpture intended as a hostile gesture, burying it could have been a way to pile insult on top of injury.

However, Mrs. Braddon says, this is more speculation than she cares to indulge in. Are there any matters of fact she can assist you with?

You ask the historian if she knows about anything… unusual taking place at the Inn after the statue was put on display.

Know? She shakes her head. During the two weeks the sculpture was up at the Inn, she was aware of several disturbances there. Stonington is a small enough community that news travels its circuit in the matter of a day, particularly if it's bad. From conversation with the ladies at the library when she stopped in to borrow a book, as well as from a brief exchange with a friend of Margaret Garrick's on line at Shop Rite, Mrs. Braddon understood that something odd was occurring at the Inn, but none of the people with whom she spoke could offer more than bland assertions spiced with strange details, and their stories tended to trip up one another. Someone had been served a bowl of blood instead of their soup became someone had flung a pan of blood at the wall became someone had cut himself with a steak knife and bled all over their meal and table. Whatever happened had done so in proximity to the statue, which no one cared for. People had seen things—in the halls, the rooms—that had frightened not a few of them right out of the Inn. A man had run out of the front door, his shirt decorated with what appeared to be blood—or so one of the librarians had heard from her cousin who was driving past as the man emerged. You see? Mrs. Braddon says.

Nodding, you ask what she thinks happened, why there were these disturbances at the Inn.

Here she is back to speculating, Mrs. Braddon says. There have been reports of strange goings-on at the Wynkoop Inn for as long as it's been open; albeit the majority of those center on the Schenker brothers. They were the last owners of the place when it was a private residence. Twins, Casper and Isaac. Their father couldn't decide which of them to leave the family home to, so he played King Solomon and split it between them,

which pleased neither brother. Things soured to the point that each claimed possession of half the house, and they built a wall right down the middle of the place. Casper started a rumor that Isaac was practicing black magic on his side of the wall.

Was there any evidence that he was? you ask.

Oh, there were plenty of odd folks who came calling on Isaac, but he was something of a scholar of ancient languages. No one found any Satanic altars after his death, if that's what you mean. More likely than not, it was his brother looking to get at him. Mrs. Braddon laughs. She doesn't know if you have any children, yourself, but if you do…

You do not.

In any event, she says, there have been sightings of one or the other brother for years, all of them reasonably benign. The brothers were striking fellows: tall, thin as rails—the story goes that Isaac tried to grow a beard, but it never amounted to much. Usually, whichever brother it is is wearing a top hat and long coat and walking along what used to be his side of the wall. People have been frightened *of* them, but not *by* them.

What took place over that fortnight, though, there's no precedent for—at least, none that Mrs. Braddon is aware of. It was as if the Inn were seized by a form of mass hysteria. Certainly, the statue didn't help matters any. Mrs. Braddon was invited to view it by Margaret Garrick, who hoped she might succeed where Professor Naida had failed and slot the piece into a history. This was a couple of days before the statue was mounted in the dining room. Margaret had it covered in the back shed. The instant the sheet slithered off and Mrs. Braddon realized what she was looking at, she said, Dear Jesus—not as an oath, you understand, but a prayer. You haven't seen the sculpture, have you?

Professor Naida showed you a picture of it, you say.

That doesn't compare, Mrs. Braddon states. The thing itself was—it was as if you were looking at a real woman, nine months pregnant, in the second, the millisecond, after something, some incredible violence, has severed her head from her neck, before she has completely understood what she has just been subject to. It was as if you were witnessing her death overtaking her. Honestly, she can't imagine what Margaret was thinking, putting up that

statue in the dining room. She would have been better donating it to the County Historical Society, or the Art Center at Penrose, or she could have tried selling it to a collector. The historian half smiles. It appears she's leapt from speculation right into—what?—psychic impressions? That said, while it's a testament to the artist's skill, she cannot pretend the sculpture did not disturb her. Especially if the guests at the Inn had been privy to any talk of ghostly occurrences, it would have been no surprise if their attention had gravitated to that statue.

Really, though—it isn't as if Mrs. Braddon spoke with, let alone properly interviewed, any of the people who were at the Inn at the time. She supposes she might have, if it hadn't struck her as so… sensationalistic. But then that terrible accident happened, and Margaret—well. For all that—at least, for the accident, Mrs. Braddon recommends you speak to Jacqueline Wright. She was the state trooper who was first on the scene. In fact, if memory serves, she was half a dozen cars back, so she practically saw it all take place. Trooper Wright, she thinks, is still stationed at the barracks on Route 209, toward Wiltwyck.

And Margaret Garrick?

That poor woman, Mrs. Braddon says, and politely declines to be drawn any further. She stands and you, understanding the sign, follow suit. Before she can move around the table to escort you to the door, you say you have one more question. Of course, the historian says.

You've read that, after the accident, the statue was… exorcised. Or that an exorcism of it was attempted.

Reverend Au Claire, Mrs. Braddon says. She took to do with the sculpture after—afterwards. She assumes Margaret asked her to do so, since she was a member of her congregation. The Reverend is at Holy Redeemer, off 209 past the shopping center. You want to talk to her.

Hasn't Mrs. Braddon heard—

This is as much as she is willing to say, Mrs. Braddon says, as much hearsay as she cares to trade in. She may not have her Ph.D., but she won't be party to perpetuating gossip and superstition.

You apologize, stating that it isn't your intention to spread either gossip or superstition, you're only trying to verify what did and did not take place,

but Mrs. Braddon leads you to the front door and stands half-behind it as you exit her home. You wish that you could think of something to say to her, some parting statement that would reaffirm the integrity of your project, put her in her place, but nothing comes to mind, so you have to settle for a Thank You that she does not answer.

24

Since your interview with Constance Braddon has ended early, you return to the Great Republic Motel and pack your overnight bag. The phone book on the room's desk lists the number of the New York State Police barracks on Route 209. A call to them reveals that this is Trooper Wright's day off. The man you speak to is unwilling to give you the trooper's home number, but consents to take down a detailed message for her. While you are walking to the front office to check out, your cell chirps, and when you answer it, a woman's voice says, This is Jackie Wright.

The state trooper is almost surprisingly willing to meet with you, offering to drive in right now if that's convenient. It isn't, you say, but maybe in a couple of hours? You have an appointment at one; could you get together at three, three-thirty someplace?

She can do that. There's a Dunkin' Donuts in the shopping plaza on 209. At the risk of conforming to popular stereotypes, why doesn't she see you there?

That would be fine, you say. You describe yourself to her, she to you, and you thank her for her willingness to talk to you.

Don't thank me yet, she says, you haven't heard what she has to say.

25

The woman behind the counter at the bagel shop is starting to recognize you, though not enough to attempt conversation with you as you sit eating your tuna salad bagel and reviewing your notes. Lunch completed, you head for Holy Redeemer Church, early for that next appointment. The Reverend Au Claire greets you at the front door to the rectory, a tall, narrow house with a steep, peaked roof that contrasts sharply with the low, angular church

with which it shares a parking lot. The priest is not as old as you expect her to be. The slender woman who directs you into the sitting room to your left cannot be much past forty. Although her black shirt rises to a black collar with a white notch, you have a difficult time picturing the Reverend performing an exorcism (about which, it must be admitted, your principal source of imagery is the famous movie). A quartet of blue padded chairs arranged around a low coffee table occupies the center of the sitting room. You select the closest one on the left, which places you opposite a picture of Jesus executed in the flat, gilded style of an Eastern Orthodox icon. Reverend Au Claire lowers herself into the chair across from you, folding her hands as she does.

When she does not speak, you clear your throat and thank her for seeing you under such short notice. This earns you a nod. You hesitate, waiting for the Reverend to speak, to offer a comment, a question. She does not. You explain that you are working on a book on what you call electronic legends. These are stories you find on the Internet that claim to be fact but frequently stray a considerable distance from their source material, in the process incorporating elements from all kinds of other narratives, from folklore to film.

Reverend Au Claire nods again. The skin around her large, brown eyes is plum, stained by insufficient sleep.

You first encountered a reference to the statue at the Wynkoop Inn while checking through the contents of a website devoted to cataloguing reports of exorcisms. In addition to listings by country, state, city, and year, the site featured a miscellaneous category that included stories of the ritual performed on pets, houses, and a variety of items including a hairdryer, a clock radio, and a chainsaw. As the Reverend can imagine, upon closer inspection, the overwhelming majority of these narratives failed to withstand much scrutiny.

There was one, however—the report of a statue that had been associated with the death of an expectant mother in a car accident, and which subsequently had received the combined attentions of a rabbi and an Episcopal priest—that proved more durable. Although the website located the event only in upstate New York, you found another page that identified the town as Stonington. A call to the local synagogue turned up Rabbi

Singer two years in his grave, but offered the unexpected benefit of connecting you to Mrs. Barbara Cohen, secretary to the current and previous rabbis. While refusing to say anything for the record, informally, Mrs. Cohen confirmed the former rabbi's involvement in what she referred to as That Business With The Statue. Not that she was present for any of it, herself, but everyone had known things weren't right over at the Inn ever since they'd put that horrible thing on display. There were all kinds of stories flying around, and then, when that poor mother was killed in that car crash…

Together with the responses to your subsequent inquiries from such people as Lawrence Schmidt, Mrs. Cohen's remarks seemed strong evidence that this was an event worth investigating. Since your arrival here, your conversations with Stephen Holland and especially Christina Henderson have solidified your conviction that something truly strange—truly uncanny—took place a decade ago.

And, Reverend Au Claire says, you would like her to supply the dramatic climax to the tale, compose a scene that would do Hollywood proud.

No, no, you say, that isn't it at all.

It's all right, the Reverend says, though the tone of her voice makes you wonder. It's understandable. So often, God seems not just reserved, but withdrawn, in hiding. It makes sense that people would be intrigued by stories that promise to show Him acting in a very direct and dramatic manner.

Does that mean she participated in something direct and dramatic?

The Reverend almost smiles. Dramatic, she says. As for direct… She shakes her head.

You don't understand.

Since your last call, the Reverend says, she's thought about what she might say to you. Christina—Hanson?

Henderson.

Henderson. She was at the Inn?

She was a waitress in the dining room.

If she’s told you what she saw, the Reverend says, then you have some notion of what Phil Singer and she had heard.

Was that what convinced the two of them to exorcise the statue?

She had the statue brought into the church because Margaret Garrick was one of her parishioners, and something of a friend. Following the accident, Margaret was beyond distraught—really, she was on the verge of a complete breakdown. She came to the rectory asking for help, and as a result of their conversation, the Reverend agreed to accept the statue temporarily. Stephen Holland drove it over in his pickup; she had him place it in the undercroft. That night… she had been up late talking with Trooper Wright. Have you spoken to her?

Not yet, you say. Later today.

The trooper was the first one on the scene, and was understandably shaken by it. She knew nothing about the statue, but she had seen…

Yes?

The Reverend will let her tell you, herself, should she choose to. In any event, it was well after two by the time she turned off her bedside lamp. Her eyes couldn’t have been closed more than five minutes when she heard the screams.

Screams?

At first, because she had been so close to sleep—had had one foot in unconsciousness—she hadn’t been sure if the sound had forced its way out of her dreams. Even after the screaming continued, she wasn’t certain. There was a quality to it, as if she were experiencing a memory, but one so overwhelming it felt as if it were real. Nonetheless, she threw off her bedclothes and unlocked the door to her room. The screaming sounded as if it were coming from inside the rectory, which was a distinct possibility. The Reverend used to leave the front door to the residence unlocked, in case one of her parishioners found herself or himself in sudden need of a place to stay. It was not a policy she advertised outside of her congregation, and even to them she mentioned it only in passing, and at that point only one of them had taken her up on her offer. With the rectory accessible, there was the possibility that someone with whom she was not familiar might let himself in, and while she believed that refuge should be available to all who

sought it, there was a reason she kept her bedroom door locked. As she ducked her head in and out of the other upstairs rooms, then started downstairs, it occurred to her that she probably would feel slightly more secure were she gripping a baseball bat, or one of the golf clubs an Episcopal priest is supposed to treasure. What a sight that would make, she thought. A blessing, or a beating?

But there was no woman on the first floor, either. Yes, she was certain the person whose throat was pouring forth these screams was a woman. The Reverend checked the rectory's nominal basement and found it empty, as was the lawn surrounding the house. She could not understand how the screaming had not drawn the attention of any of the neighbors. She crossed to the church, threw open the door, and was met by darkness. She assumed some well-meaning soul had turned off the vestibule's light, but when she ran her hand over the wall to find the switch, she felt not brick, but rough stone. The difference was such a surprise that she jerked her hand back as if she'd been burned. The air inside the church, usually still and dry, even dusty, was moving, damp, freighted with a rich, metallic smell that made her want to spit. All the while, her ears rang with the screaming, which did not stop when she panicked and fled the church, running back to the rectory and bolting the door behind her. Not until she was on the phone with Phil Singer did the screaming cease, all at once, as if a radio had been clicked off.

What, you ask, made her call the rabbi?

Phil had been—she supposes you could call him her spiritual advisor—since shortly after she'd met him. She's not sure what your religious sentiments are…

You shrug.

Fair enough, she says, you are an academic. A more… traditionally minded person of faith—her mother, say—might have found the idea of an Episcopal priest seeking advice on matters of religion from a rabbi, even one as eclectic and charming as Phil, unusual. From the moment the Reverend had met him, though, she'd been in complete and utter sympathy with him. Not that there was anything inappropriate in their friendship. He was an older man, enough so to have served in Korea and had a substantial

career as an anthropologist before abandoning that life to study at Hebrew Union. If anything, she supposes, he served as a kind of father-figure for her. He was a small man, delicate, with sharp features and bright eyes that were almost black. He favored good clothes, but seemed unwilling to accept the wear that the years had made to his frame, with the result that his jackets hung on him like drapes, his trousers had to be cinched tight around his waist. The only article of clothing that truly fit him was the cream-colored fedora he affected around town. When she dialed his number, the Reverend had no idea if he would answer, but he picked up on the first ring, as if he'd been waiting for her call. He listened to her barely coherent recitation of the night's events and said he would be right over.

In the twenty minutes or so it took him to arrive, the Reverend brewed a pot of strong coffee and dressed. She considered returning to the church, but decided to wait for Phil. He showed up wearing a plaid shirt and jeans, the only time she'd seen him dressed so casually; the fedora, however, was in place. He cradled a stack of books, which he carried into the kitchen and lowered onto the table. There were four of them, oversized volumes that reminded her of her family Bible, an enormous book in which the record of her family's major events—births, deaths, christenings, marriages—had been recorded. These were no Bibles. Their plain covers were cracked and worn with age, the edges foxed. Gray swoops and swirls marked the path Phil's cuff had swept through the dust on them. He spread the books across the table, and she saw that one of them, not the thickest, was bound with a thick leather strap and a large metal lock.

Phil, she said, what is all this?

Information, he said. The screaming has stopped?

Yes, she said, thinking, Isn't it obvious?

He nodded. That's good. Is that coffee fresh?

26

Over a mug of steaming black coffee, Phil Singer reminded the Reverend that he had not always been a rabbi.

Yes, she said.

From his youth, he said, he had been fascinated by myth. His parents were not especially observant. They kept the high holy days, but more as a way of maintaining their cultural identity than as a sign of faith. They were intellectuals: Marx and Freud were as much a part of the household as Moses or David. They believed in exposing their son to the widest possible range of traditions, and in letting him pursue his interests. Aside from a break to experience the joys of shooting at and being shot at by Red Chinese soldiers, this he did, right up to a doctorate from Columbia and a professorship at Indiana.

None of this was news to the Reverend, but when she went to say so, Phil held up his hand and continued speaking. He was obsessed, he said, with what lay before the beginning, the figures, the stories, the traditions that preceded the earliest records. You could catch glimpses of their contours, hints of their history, in the texts, the art, the customs that had come after. Though he was unconvinced by Graves's *White Goddess,* he responded to the impulse behind it. His summers he spent in Europe and the Middle East, starting his investigations at the margins and moving steadily inward, until he was standing outside a ramshackle hut in what was then the southwest Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, what has since regained the name of Azerbaijan. How happy his parents would have been to have seen their boy visiting the Workers' Paradise. Phil snorted. The U.S.S.R. was many things, but a paradise it was not.

The woman he had traveled so far—and, not to be immodest, at some risk—to talk to was old, that age past old age, when a certain kind of person comes to seem a part of the landscape, a rock or tree carved into an approximation of the human. Her eyes were yellow with cataracts, her gums long empty of teeth, her scalp home to only a few wisps of colorless hair. With one exception, her clothes were plain, drab, three sweaters buttoned over a shapeless dress underneath. The exception was a royal blue scarf the woman wore around her head as a kind of shawl. It was cheap, polyester, mass-produced in some factory who-knew-where, but it wrapped around her like a mark of royalty. Phil had been told, he didn't say by whom, to bow deeply to her and hold out the offerings the same nameless advisor had recommended: three cartons of Benson and Hedges cigarettes and a bottle of good cognac. The woman grunted and shuffled back into her cottage. She

did not close the door behind her, which Phil gambled was a sign he could follow her. His wager paid off, and for the rest of that summer and several to come he learned from her.

By now, the Reverend was completely lost. What? she asked. What did this woman teach you that was so important, you have to tell me about it now?

What she passed on, Phil said. You're familiar with the Indo-Europeans, yes? The fellows whose language grew into so many others? Their gods, their traditions did the same, spread into new countries and adapted to fit the surroundings. We've been able to reconstruct some of it by working backwards from what we know, inferring the features of the parent from the similarities among her children's features. This woman, though, she had the stories, the customs, as they had been, before they migrated across the continent. Most anthropologists, himself included, would have placed them anywhere from nine to eleven thousand years in the past. They would have been wrong. What fell from this woman's lips was older, so much older. When the last ice sheets had started their crawl down from the north, this knowledge was old, that mother-tongue the latest in a long line to convey it. He learned everything the old woman had to teach him, and by the time she was finished, he had made the acquaintance of other men and women who were willing to build on her education.

It was bad, Phil said. He was bad. Maybe there are things man was not meant to know, maybe there are not, but there are things this man was not meant to know. The theory, you see, was accompanied by a praxis whose results were—he would say incredible, but after what the Reverend had described to him, maybe not so much. It wasn't important. What he studied consumed everything in his life. His position at the university, his friends, God help him, his family: it took all of them—or he should say, he gave all of them to it, willingly. Nor was that enough. The body of knowledge he had embraced would not be satisfied until it had devoured him, too, scooped what was *him* out of his body the way you spoon the seed out of a ripe avocado and filled the hollow with itself, leaving him nothing but a vessel for passing it on to whoever tracked him to whatever hovel he'd retreated to, the only trace that would remain of him the type of liquor he would require for his tuition. If there was to be any hope for him holding onto his self, he had to abandon the path he had been on for decades—break

his staff and bury his books, so to speak. He must try to walk in a new direction, which led him back to the faith of his fathers, and from there, to the rabbinate.

27

You have to understand, the Reverend says, Phil Singer was among the kindest, calmest, *sanest* people she knew. The clergy are—they're no different from their congregations, really. Some are full of the Spirit, to put it diplomatically, and some are more measured in their faith. Some lose their belief altogether. She supposes it goes without saying that one of the surest ways to test your faith is to become a minister of it. It isn't so much the big things, the diseases and disasters—those you're ready for; you expect them to challenge your faith. No, what grinds you down are the little things, the hundred daily failings you witness in yourself and in others, the pettiness, the spite, the jealousy, the dull, stupid meanness in people. When you start, you know you aren't going to be working any miracles, but you imagine there will be a kind of nobility to the calling you've answered, a kind of austere beauty. Sooner than you'd like, that image is replaced by another, of yourself as a department manager in a spiritual big-box, where the customers are shopping for the maximum of salvation at the deepest discount they can find. The temptation to—not despair so much as permanent discouragement, can feel overwhelming.

Phil, though, never showed the slightest sign of that. He was a pragmatist without being a pessimist. The Reverend knew that he'd been married and had grown children and grandchildren with whom he maintained an uneasy correspondence, but she attributed their estrangement to Phil's split from their mother/grandmother. He'd been quite open about his responsibility for the disintegration of his marriage, if a bit vague as to the exact circumstances. The Reverend had assumed an affair, alcoholism, one of the usual mid-life obstacles, not… she wasn't sure what Phil had described to her. Membership in some kind of cult? Already the day had gone from terrible to frightening; now it appeared to be moving again, from frightening to she couldn't say what. She wanted to tell Phil to hold on a minute, to stop, go outside, come in a second time, and start all over. But he

had finished his coffee, rinsed the mug and set it on the dishrack, and was turning to the books he'd placed on the table.

28

The books, Phil said, he didn't exactly bury. He put them in a trunk, chained and padlocked the trunk, and kept it in a safe place. These last five years, that had been in the middle of a heap of junk in the basement. The best spot to hide something is in plain sight, yes? The books couldn't be burned—they could, but that—it was better for them not to be destroyed. He couldn't give them away; he could not be responsible for placing them into someone else's hands. Eventually, he knew, he would have to come up with a plan for their disposition—perhaps the Vatican's Black Library would accept them.

In any event, it seemed they were going to prove useful, now. For the last week, he had been hearing some very unusual rumors concerning a statue that had been put on display at the Wynkoop Inn. He'd been spending more and more time in his basement, pretending to fiddle with this or that while eyeing the trunk. He remembered, Phil said. He had done everything in his power to put the knowledge out of his mind, but what he had learned was seared into his memory. The second Barbara Cohen told him that the sculpture mounted on the Inn's dining room wall was of a headless woman big with child, he had recognized the Mother of Stone.

Who? the Reverend said.

The Romans called her the *magna mater,* the great mother, Phil said. They borrowed her from the Greeks, who conflated her with Gaia, their Mother Earth. The Greeks had her from Phrygia, in Asia Minor, where she was known as Cybele, the Mother of the Mountain. She is very ancient, and very terrible. He had opened one of the books and was turning onionskin pages. *Les mystères du ver,* he said, nodding at the volume. The Reverend did not recognize the title. Here, Phil said, pointing to a passage. Drawing near, the Reverend saw a block of dense black script beneath what looked like a woodprint of a headless pregnant woman, done in a style that suggested the medieval. She could not decipher the language or, for that matter, the precise characters in which the text was written; it resembled

what she'd seen of Gothic, but not enough for her make anything of it. Phil, however, was sliding his index finger across the rows of text, his lips moving soundlessly.

This Cybele, he said at last, was served by ten priestesses. Once each generation, those priestesses who could would get themselves with child, in order to draw the Mother—that is one of her names—into themselves and so bring her to a new generation. For the Mother ever longed for a greater closeness to her children. Yes, yes. Rituals, more rituals—ah. But the—you could call him the Sky Father—had grown jealous of the Mother, who, in some versions of the story, was his mother, too. Therefore, he devised a trap for her. When her priestesses met for her worship, he sent his followers into her grotto. They slew the guards and laid their hands on the priestesses, whom they carried to the top of a high mountain. There they put the priestesses to death, cutting the heads from their bodies and hanging those bodies by their feet, so that all the blood ran out of them into the ground. As they did this, the Sky Father's followers spoke secret words he had given them. In this way did the Sky Father and his party bind the Mother to the mountain.

That isn't all, Phil said. It never is. There were no priestesses left, but there were still those who were loyal to the Mother. They hunted the ones who had defiled the Mother's grotto and profaned her servants and took revenge on them. Then they offered themselves as a new sacred order, the men making themselves more like women to be pleasing to the Mother.

What, the Reverend said, were they cross-dressing?

And self-castrating, Phil said. The problem was, their deity had been overthrown, confined in a way none of them knew how to undo. They could maintain some of the forms of her worship, but what had animated those rituals had been placed beyond them. Until one fellow had an idea. If the Mother were locked in stone, then she might be brought forth through stone, through representations of her carved from the very rock of the mountain that held her. Most of these statues conformed to the prototypical image of a fertility goddess: undersized head, oversized breasts, enormous hips, tiny feet. It appears they served their purpose. But another fellow—quite possibly the same one who'd hit on carving the Mother's image, though Phil didn't think so—believed that, if the Mother were to be

portrayed, it should be with the violence that had been inflicted upon her. There is something almost uniquely powerful about the spectacle of the suffering god, isn't there?

These statues, Phil said, were a mistake. The Mother had demanded her fair share of blood—as was the case with so many deities, it was the preferred way to slake her thirst—but always within the context of her worship. The sculptures this nameless artist struck from the rock—it was as if, in giving form to the savagery that had been visited upon her, he had provided an egress for the anger and pain that act had aroused. Blood ran from the statues as if they were alive, and blood ran from those around them, especially women carrying children. In short order, the statues were taken down and buried, secret words said over them in order to subdue the Mother's wrath in them.

The information concerning what these images could do proved more difficult to suppress. Down through the millennia, new sculptures of the Mother have been carved, some as an aid to worship, others as a means of study, still others as a weapon. One of the popes—the Borgia, Alexander VI—commissioned a statue of the Mother that he had presented to a hated rival under the guise of a peace offering. By the time the man suspected the gift, the tiled floors of his villa were running with blood. In fact, Phil said, he wondered if this sculpture sitting under the Reverend's church might be the same one. There was a somewhat… odd character who came to these parts around the turn of the twentieth century. He lived in a big house that stood where the reservoir is now. From what he understood, a number of unusual items were noted in the man's possession.

Wait, the Reverend said. Just—wait. All you need to do is carve this particular image and you'll unleash—blood? death?

It's a little more involved than that, Phil said. He had closed the book he'd been reading from and turned his attention to the volume whose covers were locked shut. Unless you have a piece of the mountain where the Mother was bound and possess the skill to work its material, you must employ certain procedures in order to bring the Mother forth from your sculpture.

Certain procedures? the Reverend said. Like what? sacrificing a virgin?

No, Phil said. It is important that she is not a virgin. She should be expecting a child, the closer to her delivery, the better.

29

Had you asked her, the Reverend says, if God were active in the world, she would have answered that she believed He was, but His movements tended to be subtle, often hard to detect. If you had followed up that question by asking her about the host of obvious, even garish miracles recorded throughout the Bible, in the lives of the saints, she would have replied that those were other times. Were she being particularly candid, she would have added that many of the miraculous events described in Scripture probably had perfectly natural explanations—what was important was the attribution of those events to a loving God. And were you one of her close friends—Phil Singer, say—she would have confided in you that she judged many of the supernatural occurrences incorporated into the biblical narratives to be outright myth—not a lie, you understand, but a figurative means of expressing a truth.

Now here she was, listening to her good friend tell her that she was in the midst of a myth, that she was in one of the older biblical stories, when the God of the Israelites was only one deity contending with a pantheon of rivals. Not to mention disclosing a tradition of what sounded like black magic, which would be ludicrous if it hadn’t involved apparent human sacrifice. Stop, she wanted to say. This was everything about religion she couldn’t stand: the sin, the superstition, the violence.

But Phil had removed a key from his jeans and unlocked the fourth book. He opened its cover, and the kitchen light dimmed. Darkness filled the air in swirling motes, like a storm of ash. The Reverend crossed herself and raised her hands to shield herself from them, but the black flakes swept through her flesh as if they weren’t there. Phil, she said.

He was barely visible, the center of a storm of darkness. He had picked up another of the books and was holding it out to her. If you would, he said. She took the volume, which was far and away the thickest of the four. Its cover was plain except for a small design at its center: a slender ring broken at about seven o’clock. From amongst its pages, a ream of other sheets of

paper protruded. It will be simpler, Phil said, if you start at the back and work your way forward—it should be a dozen or so pages from the end.

What, the Reverend asked, was she looking for?

She would know it, Phil answered, when she saw it.

She did. The book was a kind of journal-cum-scrapbook, its pages crowded with writing in various shades of blue, black, green, and red, some passages running parallel to one another, others looping one around the other, still others squeezing into margins. Photographs and postcards, some black and white, others full color, all of different locations, had been slotted between the sheets; while maps, newspaper clippings, mimeographs, photocopies, and computer printouts had been paper-clipped, taped, and stapled to the pages. The Reverend recognized pictures of the cathedral at Chartres, an inscription of a labyrinth on a gray rock, a painting of two rows of stylized figures racing their chariots toward each other, framed by lines of Hindi. Eleven pages in, a sheaf of photocopies unfolded and she found herself reading the Anglican Communion's Major Rite of Exorcism. This is supposed to be in the Bishop's Book, she said.

It was, Phil said. The Bishop of Edinburgh's, to be precise.

But, she said, it's the Bishop's Book. It's not supposed to be opened to just anyone.

Everything you've seen—you're seeing, Phil said, and you want to obsess over the Bishop's Book? Fine. He had known the Bishop. Lovely man. He permitted that copy to be made. Satisfied?

This, she said, you want me to perform an exorcism?

He wanted her to perform that rite, yes.

But, the Reverend said, there are procedures for this sort of thing. Someone's supposed to perform an official investigation, and the bishop is supposed to give approval, and the priest who undertakes the exorcism is supposed to be more mature, experienced… And anyway, what exactly is it that needs exorcising? The ghost of a murdered goddess?

More or less, Phil said. We are trying to push the wrath that has found its way out of the statue back inside it.

For which you need an Anglican rite?

For which he needed her belief in that rite.

What was he going to be doing, she said, reciting Psalm 91 and blowing the Shofar?

He would be saying some words it was probably best she didn't listen to too closely.

30

She can't say it was unbelievable, the Reverend says, because there was Phil, surrounded by pieces of blackness, as if all the letters on all the pages of the book he'd unlocked had risen into a whirlwind of ink—not to mention the screaming she'd heard, and whatever had happened to the interior of the church, and everything that had occurred with the headless statue, the report of which she had ascribed to Margaret Garrick's hysteria over the death at her front door, but which at this point appeared largely true. Nor can she call it insane, because there was a certain kind of logic—no, that isn't the right word. There was a consistency to what was unfolding around her that made it sound more than plausible—it sounded compelling. What it was was unbearable. She, who spent her days visiting the ailing members of her graying congregation in their beds at the local hospitals, who passed her nights worrying over the decline in Sunday's collection amount, whose excuse for a diversion was mediating a dispute between a ninety-two-year-old widow and her fifty-nine-year-old son about her ability to operate a motor vehicle safely: she was being summoned to battle with supernatural agencies. The coffee she had swallowed churned in her stomach. Her hands shook; her knees trembled the way they had before her first high school dance.

Without waiting for her answer, Phil Singer was heading for the front door. Hang on, the Reverend said, there were some things she needed to gather.

31

Darkness trailing behind him like a ragged cape, Phil led the way to the church, the Reverend doing her best not to trip over her feet as she scanned the Major Rite. At the entrance to Holy Redeemer, Phil stopped and said, If you'd like to begin.

You've seen the movies, the Reverend says, *The Exorcist* and its imitators. You have an idea of what came next: the Sign of the Cross, the opening prayers, the reading from the Gospels. If there's anything that would surprise you about the actual rite, it's how much longer everything takes. Throughout, Phil remained silent, until she withdrew the vial of holy water from her pocket, popped the top with her thumb, and splashed the church door. As she was pronouncing her latest Amen, he uttered a word, a single syllable. The sound started somewhere deep in Phil's throat, then on its way out collapsed into itself, so that what emerged was barely distinguishable from a bark. She couldn't guess at the language that counted such a word among its vocabulary. Speaking it appeared to lend Phil a certain energy: he stood straighter, his eyes shining, all trace of middle-of-the-night fatigue gone. Shall we? he asked, and opened the door and strode inside.

32

The interior of the church was still dark, the air still restless, damp, laden with a thick, meaty smell. Does it sound odd if she admits that the first emotion she felt confronting that cool blackness was relief? She had not hallucinated, had not encouraged Phil to his revelations personal and historical for a fantasy. Right away, though, her relief was swallowed by dread so strong it made her stomach twist. She snapped on the flashlight she'd brought with her and continued her part of the exorcism.

Actually, she says, that isn't true, not exactly. Before she proceeded with the rite, she swept the flashlight's beam around her.

You wait, then say, And?

It wasn't a very powerful light, the Reverend says. Ten feet out, it faded almost to nothing.

But—

But the church had… changed, she says. It had… reduced, simplified. As far as she could tell, she and Phil were standing at the entrance to a sizable cave. The ground in front of them sloped down at a gradual angle. She waited for Phil to begin descending it. When he did not, she resumed the rite.

At the conclusion of the next reading from the Gospels, Phil gave voice to a second, guttural word. It might have been the same one he'd spoken outside the church; she wasn't sure. The sound of it scraped against her ears, seemed to thicken the motes of darkness swirling around her friend. The flashlight flickered. Can you read as you walk? Phil said.

Yes, she said.

Then follow me, he said, and proceed with the ritual. He started down the slope into the cave.

33

They walked, the Reverend says, for a long time. The floor leveled, which made it somewhat easier for her to carry on reciting the exorcism. A couple of steps ahead of her, Phil was bursting with energy, as if he were barely restraining himself from breaking into a run. The blackness surrounding him shone like fresh ink spilled on a page. She did her best to concentrate on the words of the rite, but she kept seeing things at the edges of her vision. The glow of her flashlight seemed to pick out faces in the rock under her feet, shadows that didn't belong to anything. She had the most intense sensation of being watched, the Reverend says, and you can be sure, a woman who preaches to a congregation of a hundred-plus knows about being looked at. Out in the darkness around them, she could feel something, somethings, keeping track of them.

She was still reading when they arrived at the statue. Phil stopped short, and she almost collided with him. Right away, the Reverend says, she understood where they were—she could see a figure at the very top of her vision—but she did not lift her eyes from the page until she had delivered her Amen and Phil coughed another, or maybe it was the same, word. Then she pointed her flashlight at the form before them.

You haven't seen the statue, have you? the Reverend says. No, that's ridiculous—how could you? She had the photos of it burned, afterwards. It was awful. Not only was the subject disturbing, to say the least, but the style, the skill with which it had been rendered made it monstrous, obscene. It was intolerable to look at, yet she could not keep her eyes from it. Her flashlight flared on something at its base: blood, a shallow pool encircling

the sculpture, fed, she saw, by a network of narrow streams winding out of the darkness. She traced the flashlight's beam along the nearest line of blood to the foot of a shadowed form. Not shadowy, the Reverend says, shadowed. She played the light up the figure, but it remained obscure, as if it were behind a curtain. Despite this, she could detect the swell of its belly, the space where its head should have been. She swept the flashlight in an arc and saw the other tributaries descending from the feet of the other occluded forms, each with a rounded belly and headless neck. Their collective blood was the red reek clouding the air.

Phil, she said.

Go on, please, Marie, he said.

This time, when she resumed the exorcism, Phil spoke, too, in more of what she had christened the Black Speech of Mordor. Do you know Tolkien?

You do.

The Reverend nods. Because she was focused on the rite, she heard it as background noise, an unpleasant sequence of snarls, coughs, and cries that sounded like nothing meant to be produced by a human throat. There was an irregular rhythm to his sentences that intersected the up and down of hers at odd moments, so that it was almost as if they were speaking halves of a single word. The language—the Black Speech—clawed at her ears, as if each syllable were covered in barbs; she had the sense that, were she not intent on the pages balanced on her hand, her ears would be bleeding.

The statue appeared to be fading, along with the pool of blood, the shadowed company, as if it had all been projected onto a large screen and the bulb in the projector were being turned down, in order that she could see what the screen had concealed. She was looking into a small, squarish room, possibly a bedroom, although there was no bed within it, only a tall wooden crate set lengthwise near the middle. At one end of the box, the statue lay atop a heap of old blankets and sheets. The walls, painted pale green, had been chalked with symbols, as had the ceiling and floor. The Reverend couldn't identify most of them. She picked out a scattering of Greek characters, what she was reasonably sure were Arabic letters, but aside from the broken circle she'd seen on the cover of the book she was

holding, the rest were unfamiliar: circles bisected by straight lines bisected by short, wavy lines; a long, gradual curve like a smile; what might have been a cup or a chalice. To her right, the door to the room swung inwards, and a man led a woman into it. Both were wearing togas, but they were more the improvised arrangement of a white sheet and a pair of safety pins common to amateur productions of Shakespeare or fraternity parties than historically accurate clothing. The man was young, pale, and thin, his chin fringed by black hair aspiring to a beard. The woman was equally young, though with better color and a fuller form, one grown large with pregnancy. The tilt of the woman's head, the wander of her eyes, suggested that she was under the influence of some substance, a suggestion that was borne out by the ease with which the young man lowered her to and positioned her on the wooden crate, making it a kind of couch for her. She lay placidly, with her head at the statue-end of the box, while the young man said things the Reverend could not hear. He seemed to be reassuring her as he crouched on the other side of the box, searching for something on the floor with his hands. Once he found it, he stood slowly, so as not to disturb the woman, who was staring intently at one of the symbols on the ceiling. She did not see the huge Bowie knife shining in his right hand. Even when he raised it over his head and swung it down into her bare throat, the Reverend could almost believe the woman never saw her death descending.

She understood that what she was witnessing was a kind of vision. That did not make it any easier to watch. Sharp as the knife appeared, the young man's arm was not up to the task, and while the blood vented out of the wound he'd inflicted, the woman was able to raise her hands enough for him to have to hold them away with his free hand while he hacked at her throat a second and a third time. Her head severed, he pushed it off the box onto the floor, dropped the knife, and moved along the corpse, from which blood continued to spill. Catching it under the back and hips, he hoisted the body, tilting the neck down to help the blood continue its exit. Its destination was, of course, the sculpture, whose white limbs drank in the blood that splashed them. As he struggled to hold the corpse up, the young man's lips moved quickly. When he could support it no longer, he let the body crash onto the crate and sat down heavily beside it. His arms, his chest, his face were spotted and streaked red; he pulled the toga from the

corpse and wiped himself with it. After he regained his strength, the young man stood, approached the statue, which looked much less blood-drenched than it should have, and picked it up. His arms straining with the weight, he hurriedly carried the statue out of the room. He did not return.

The Reverend continued with the exorcism, the words to which seemed to be losing their sense, blending with Phil's Black Speech into a third thing altogether. She heard herself saying Amen, and In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, and Let us pray, but she was finding it difficult to maintain the larger sense of what she was reading. The bloody tableau before her dimmed to darkness, swallowed by whatever memory had displayed it, and in the space it had occupied, the Reverend saw a faint shape whose outline suggested the statue, returned to view.

It was not. At what might have been the far end of a long tunnel stood a woman. She, too, was dressed in a white toga, but the gather and folds of it showed it to be no costume. The distance made it difficult for the Reverend to distinguish the woman's features with any certainty, but she had the impression of a regal, even haughty, cast to them. The woman was enormously pregnant, and she carried the swell of her belly proudly. There are some Christian theologians, the Reverend says, who have suggested the usefulness of re-conceptualizing the Trinity in female terms, as Mother, Daughter, Spirit. If you had told her the woman she was seeing was the Mother in that schema, she would have accepted it. This was creation made manifest.

And then the woman's throat split open, spilling blood down her front. The top of her toga went from scarlet to crimson as the blood soaked into and spread across the fabric, slicking it to her body. Her hands grabbed her belly, whose surface convulsed as the child inside responded in panic to the violence done its mother. Blood streamed from her throat, from her mouth, from her legs. Her toga was sopping, almost black. Blood spattered and puddled and pooled at her feet. Her face twisted, with pain, or sorrow, or rage, the Reverend could not say. Eyes full of tears, voice rasping, she gave all her attention to proceeding with the rite.

The next time she dared glance up, the woman was gone, her place taken by the statue, which was no longer situated in a pool of blood, guarded by the shadowed ranks of the murdered. The Reverend went on with the rite.

She was not sure when she noticed that Phil was no longer uttering the Black Speech; she had the sense that he had ceased some time ago, but could not pinpoint the exact moment. She stole a look at him and was startled to see his mouth set in a smile so wide it was as much a grimace. She pronounced another Amen and he remained silent. She pushed on with the remainder of the rite. Her mouth was dry, her lips chapped. It felt as if she had been speaking all night. She recited the Lord's Prayer, traced the Sign of the Cross in the air, read another passage from the Gospels. She invoked the aid of a host of angels and saints. She sprinkled the rest of her holy water. She shifted Phil's book from one hand to the other and back again. Around her, the air steadily filled with light. She invoked the Trinity one more time. She delivered her final Amen.

In the silence that followed, she raised her eyes from the book and found herself and Phil standing in the undercroft, its high windows glowing with the dawn. She closed the book and took in the walls hung with the felt banners the Sunday school kids had assembled, the pamphlet table by the door with its red-and-white-checked cloth, the folding tables and chairs stacked below the large window into the kitchen. In the center of the water-stained carpet was the statue, no less awful than before, but perhaps slightly less intimidating.

Phil Singer's mouth had relaxed from its rictus grin; he, too, had closed and lowered his book. The storm of blackness that had encircled him was gone. The energy that had radiated from him was gone, too; if anything, he looked older than he had when he'd arrived a few hours ago. He turned his gaze away from the sculpture and said he would bring his car to the back door. He thought it would be easier for them to transport the statue to it via that route. Also, there was less chance of anyone seeing them that way.

The Reverend nodded but did not say anything, though she passed Phil's book back to him. She waited in the undercroft while he took his books and fetched his Accord, and she helped him to carry the sculpture past the kitchen and bathrooms and out the back door, and to wrestle it into his trunk. The back of his car sagged with the weight. Throughout, the Reverend remained silent. Only when the trunk had thunked shut did she say, Phil, what happened here?

You and I—but mostly you—prevented something bad from becoming worse, he said.

So it worked? she said. The rite, the exorcism, was a success?

As much as such things can be, he said.

What does that mean?

It means you should get some sleep and not worry about anything, he said.

There was one more question she wanted to ask him, the Reverend says, but she couldn't bring herself to frame it, not after what they'd just finished, after what had occasioned it in the first place. But as she stood watching Phil turn out of the church parking lot, the image of the woman at the end of that long tunnel, her throat parting to spill her blood over her distended belly, rose in her memory. The expression on her face…

34

A check of your watch reveals that you are out of time with the Reverend Au Claire. If you intend to keep your appointment with Trooper Wright, you must leave now. This is not a problem: the priest appears to have reached the end of her story. Enough questions to keep the two of you here the rest of the afternoon compete for your tongue. You settle on asking what became of the statue.

She presumes Phil reburied it, the Reverend says. Of course, the next time she saw him, that was the first thing she said to him, but he would offer no more than that it was in a safe place. His house was a few miles from town, as you're going over the mountain toward Huguenot. It sat on a little bit of property; she presumes he dug a hole somewhere out there and dropped the sculpture into it. To be honest, after Phil passed away a couple of years ago and a few of his friends took it upon themselves to clean out his house, she half expected one of them to bump into it in his basement, covered with an old blanket.

No one did, though.

And the exorcism? you say. It was effective? No more appearances by the headless woman?

There have been rumors aplenty, the Reverend says. Most of them undoubtedly the product of overactive imaginations colliding with well-handled gossip, facilitated by alcohol.

But, you say, she feels she succeeded.

The Reverend smiles, as if at a private joke.

You have another meeting that you're just about to be late for, you say, prompting the priest to rise from her chair, but you would very much appreciate it if you could speak with Revered Au Claire for a little while later on, maybe after your next interview is finished?

She's sorry, the priest says, but no, she's said all she has to say.

But—

You don't want to be late for your appointment, she says, do you?

35

There is nothing you can do. You thank the Reverend for her time and her candor, neither of which she appears too happy to have granted you so much of, and rush out the rectory's front door. The plaza in which the Dunkin' Donuts at which you've agreed to meet Jacqueline Wright is slotted is a literal two-minute drive from the church, but you speed there, anyway, afraid that the trooper will have taken your delay for a cancellation and left already. You wish you could spare five minutes to write down the highlights of your interview with the Reverend Au Claire, but you dare not be any later. As you step out of the Metro, you survey the parking lot for the roof rack of a police cruiser. When you fail to find one, your heart sinks. You are on the verge of unlocking the door you just locked when you remember that this is the trooper's day off, so she will have driven here in whatever vehicle she owns.

Inside the Dunkin' Donuts, you are greeted by a woman seated at one of the tables by the front window. She rises to shake your hand, a tall woman whose figure is not quite ample enough to qualify as stout. Her grip is firm. You thank Jacqueline Wright for waiting for you and apologize for your lateness: your last interview ran long. It's all right, the trooper says, she's been enjoying a coffee and a blueberry muffin. Do you want something?

A coffee would be nice, you admit, if she wouldn't mind giving you another minute. Maybe you could get her something while you're at the counter, another muffin, perhaps? She declines, leaving you to fetch a large coffee with extra milk from a woman who looks too old to be working the cash register at a Dunkin' Donuts. You wonder if she's the owner. Coffee in hand, you return to the front of the shop and take up your seat opposite Jacqueline.

You were talking to someone else about the accident? she says.

Peeling back the tab on the lid to your cup, you nod. As you told her on the phone, you're researching the circumstances surrounding Rachel Torino's death ten years ago. There have been reports of… unusual events in the weeks leading up to the accident that took her life, all of them connected to a statue that was unearthed on the grounds of the Wynkoop Inn. You've spoken to Stephen Holland about it, and Christina Henderson, as well as an art history professor at Penrose College and Constance Braddon. Before you came here, you were talking to the Reverend Au Claire.

Sounds like you've been busy, the trooper says.

Very, you say. You're trying to be thorough.

Which is why you contacted her.

Exactly. Mrs. Braddon suggested it, actually.

Did Constance tell you that she saw the accident happen?

She thought you had, you say.

Jacqueline nods. Her large green eyes seem open almost too wide. She was seven cars behind, on her way back to the barracks. Needless to say, she didn't witness the poor woman's death, but she saw the truck lose control. It was one of those trucks that carries sheets of glass, you know, tilted on its sides. Traffic was stopped on the trooper's side of the road—a delivery van waiting to make a left turn further ahead, which it couldn't do because the cars going the other way were traveling at a steady clip. The glass truck was part of that moving traffic. About ten yards in front of the car in which the woman—

Rachel Torino.

Right, Rachel Torino—about ten yards from where she and her husband were sitting, the front left tire of the glass truck blew out. The trooper heard it: it sounded like an explosion. The truck dipped and swerved to its left. The driver overcorrected to his right, and as he did, the pickup following him crashed into his back. From what she understands, it took the forensics guys a couple of weeks to work everything out, the forces, the angles, the velocities, that kind of stuff. Practically speaking, what resulted was one of the tall sheets of glass on the back of the truck coming loose, falling onto the very front of the Torinos' car, and shattering. One of the pieces—only one, that was all it took—was large enough to smash through the passenger's side of the windshield and sever Rachel's head.

That's… pretty remarkable, you say.

The forensics crew claimed it wasn't even a one in a million thing. It was more like a one in a billion occurrence. Jacqueline takes a sip from her coffee.

That must have been difficult to see.

It was a goddamned nightmare, she says. Once she understood what had taken place in front of her, she flipped on her car's lights and steered onto the shoulder. There were already people out of their cars and moving in the direction of the Torinos' car when she threw her cruiser into Park. Fortunately, she'd had the foresight to call in the accident before she exited her car, because once she did, the first person she met was the husband—

James.

James, yeah—he was walking toward her. He was covered in blood, so much that, at first, she thought he'd been injured, until she saw what he was cradling in his arms. His wife's eyes were open, her expression one of slight surprise, as if the baby within her had dealt her an especially sharp kick. Just tell me she's going to be okay, he was saying. She's expecting our first child. Just tell me she's going to be okay.

Jesus, you say.

Yeah, Jacqueline says. His mind had collapsed, you know?

You nod.

She shakes her head. Such a shame. It's hard to imagine anyone getting over that. It—she had a difficult time with it herself. While you're in the Academy, they show you photos of accident victims—pretty graphic stuff—but they're only pictures. This wasn't her first traffic fatality, but it was worse than anything she'd seen before. The EMTs who showed up were pretty rattled by it, too. After she turned James Torino over to them, she did what she could to chase the spectators away from the car and the… rest of his wife's remains. She recognized Margaret Garrick among them—she must have come running down the front steps of the Inn—and though she noticed the look of horror on the woman's face, the trooper didn't note it as particularly remarkable. Everybody was horrified, herself included. She knows she shouldn't, but she can't help thinking that, if she had been more attentive, she might have picked up on the signs Mrs. Garrick must have been giving off.

Signs?

That she was going to cut her throat.

What?

From what she understands, Jacqueline says, the woman had been under a tremendous amount of stress, all of it related to the statue you mentioned. It sounds like some kind of mass hysteria to her, but its effects on Mrs. Garrick were real enough. Early the morning after the accident—about four A.M.—the call came in that there had been some kind of incident at the Wynkoop Inn involving a knife, and at least one person was injured. Funny, the trooper says, she wasn't supposed to be on duty, especially after what she'd seen the previous day. But she'd already agreed to cover a colleague's shift, and the barracks was short-handed, so her C.O. didn't have much choice in the matter. It was fine with her. She preferred being out on patrol to sitting at home, dwelling on what she'd seen. Anyway, she'd stopped in to speak to Reverend Au Claire for a little while, which had satisfied her C.O. for the moment.

To tell the truth, though, she'd passed those late hours driving back and forth on the stretch of 209 where the accident had happened, so maybe she wasn't as okay as she told herself she was. It meant that, when dispatch put out the news about the Inn, she was right there to respond to it. Mrs.

Garrick was lucky she was. She'd cut herself pretty deep—grabbed one of the butcher knives in the kitchen and sawed her neck open. There was a waitress with her. She did what she could to stanch the flow of blood, which wasn't enough, really, but then Jacqueline arrived, and then the EMTs came hot on her heels. Apparently, it was touch and go for a while there—Mrs. Garrick had done more damage to herself than you would have thought possible—but she survived; although she couldn't speak anymore, had damaged her voicebox. The trooper understands that, as soon as she was well enough to be moved, she was transferred to a private psychiatric facility.

That—you were present for all that, you say. It must have been surreal.

It was, Jacqueline says. Later on, she needed to take some sick leave, to sort out what had happened. Well, not what had happened, but its effect on her.

Of course, you say.

After the EMTs arrived at the Inn, there was an incident that made her aware of how much she'd been traumatized by the last day's incidents. She takes another sip from her coffee.

You wait.

She had identified the knife the moment she entered the kitchen, the trooper says. Mrs. Garrick had dropped it beside her, and the waitress had kicked it aside. While there was no doubt in Jacqueline's mind about what had taken place in here, proper procedure had to be followed. So as soon as the EMTs had come bustling into the kitchen and she'd told them what she knew and backed out of the way, she set about securing the evidence, i.e. the knife. She carried a pair of rubber gloves in her pocket for such an eventuality. She snapped them on, bent beside the knife, and picked it up by the end of its handle. It was huge, a prop from a horror movie. Blood slid down to the tip of the blade and dribbled onto the floor. She held it up for inspection and, reflected in the knife's stainless steel, saw something—saw someone.

Someone?

Jacqueline Wright takes a deep breath and releases it with the name: Rachel Torino. Her head was missing, and she was wearing a white, like a white

dress, but she was pregnant, so the trooper had no doubt of her identity. She was standing behind where the EMTs were working furiously over Mrs. Garrick, tearing open packets of bandages, drawing something into a syringe, maintaining steady chatter. Jacqueline turned, and there was no one, no headless ghost, inclining the ruin of her neck toward the EMTs and their patient. Out of the corner of her eye, something moved. She pivoted to the right, and there, reflected on the polished metal of the refrigerator door, she saw the ghost again, standing this time, with her back to the trooper, once more leaning over the EMTs. She seemed so solid; Jacqueline could clearly see the places where the blood had run from her neck and plastered the dress to her skin. When the trooper moved her head, though, the floor between her and the EMTs was vacant. She stepped away from the refrigerator, and suddenly she saw the ghost everywhere: curving around the side of a soup pot on the stove; cupped in the bowl of a serving spoon; multiplied in rows of wine glasses. She was suspended in a window; she wavered in a water jug; she was upside down in the tiling on the floor. No matter where Jacqueline found her, she was oriented in the same direction, toward where Margaret Garrick lay, having tried and failed to join her, to become like her. When you thought about it, she had done a remarkable job. It wouldn't take much more to complete what she'd begun.

The EMT was talking for at least a minute before his words started to make sense to her. Jackie? she heard him saying. Is everything all right? Are you feeling okay? She couldn't understand why he was asking her these questions, or why he was standing, his hands held out in front of him, as if to ward her off or grab her, until she followed the line of his gaze and saw the knife clenched in her hand, her grip so tight, the blade was shaking.

36

Naturally, she says, she placed the knife down on the nearest countertop and exited the kitchen posthaste.

Naturally, you say. You have recognized the stare with which the trooper has been regarding you for the duration of your conversation: it is the bright look of someone taking powerful psychiatric medications. Your experience is not sufficient for you to identify the exact class of drug, but you have

dealt with enough students being treated for mental health disorders to feel that some measure of caution is in order. You don't know what circumstances have brought her to this point in her life—it's entirely possible that it's completely unrelated to the narrative she is relating to you—but it would not do to raise any memories that would complicate her condition. If you haven't already. You clear your throat and ask, Was that your last encounter with the ghost?

More or less. She shrugs. There were times she'd think she saw something, but it never turned out to be anything. She knows there are all kinds of stories about the ghost, local legends, but she never experienced anything like that.

You are on the verge of winding the interview down, thanking Jacqueline for her time and telling her that you have to think about the drive back home, when she says, All this—everything she went through—kind of messed her up. For the longest time—she's talking years—she had these moments where she'd find herself looking at the knives in her kitchen. She has one of those wooden blocks with slots for all the different knives you might use in your cooking. Sometimes—not too often, but often enough to be a problem—she would slide the butcher knife from its space and stand staring at it. Her knife wasn't as high-end as the one Margaret Garrick had turned on herself. That one had been a single edge so sharp you could see it; this one was serrated, albeit finely. She wasn't sure which would cut better. Granted, the knife at the Inn was restaurant-grade, hers a condo-warming present purchased at J. C. Penney, but with a strong enough arm behind it, she would bet her knife could make it at least as far as Mrs. Garrick's, if not further. When she would have these… episodes, it was like she could almost hear something, a scream, coming from deep inside the blade's mirrored surface. She couldn't decide if the scream were of pain, or anger, fury.

It was not a good time, Jacqueline says. There were—well, there were a lot of things going on—going wrong in her life. In the end, she got some help, and things started to improve. One thing her therapist told her, though, was that dwelling on this kind of stuff tends to draw it closer to you. She doesn't want to freak you out or anything, but she feels like she has to tell you to be careful.

37

Your conversation with Jacqueline Wright concluded, you opt to remain at Dunkin' Donuts and start work on recording as much of your last two interviews as you can retrieve from your memory. Thinking of it as the toll you're paying for the extra time you intend to stay here, you purchase another coffee with extra milk and a coffee roll, and settle down to work with your notebook and your pen.

38

A third coffee and two trips to the toilet later, you have transcribed as much of your interviews with Marie Au Claire and Jacqueline Wright as you can recall. Your writing hand has gone beyond painful to numb, your lower back has tightened into a clench that has sent you rummaging your purse for the bottle of ibuprofen you carry for such contingencies. You shake out your hand, crack your knuckles, lean back in your chair. Outside the front window, night has faded the cars in the parking lot to the same dull color. You pick up the pen to put it away and cannot resist jotting a final few questions: What is the significance of the broken ring design on the cover of the book Phil Singer gave to Marie Au Claire? Personal emblem, or (oc)cult symbol? Is there a connection between the young man Marie Au Claire reported seeing in her vision and Isaac Schenker? Are there any records of Isaac engaging in unusual behavior? What ritual did Phil Singer perform? What are the other rites of exorcism, aside from Christian and Jewish? Do any involve speaking in another language? Why did Annabel Ferris carve her self-portraits to fit the statue's neck?

39

After a frugal dinner at the pizza place across the parking lot from the Dunkin' Donuts—an order of garlic knots, a plain slice, and a Coke—you return to the rental car. There is enough gas left in its undersized tank to return you over the mountains to Huguenot, where you remember several gas stations on the approach to the Thruway entrance. Traffic is light, and you make the left out of the lot without difficulty. In the dark, your route, hardly familiar,

> seems strange, the turns you must make coming too soon or not soon enough, the roads you follow full of sudden curves you take too fast. Under normal conditions, you would have a white-knuckle grip on the steering wheel, your eyes glued to the road, sweat trickling down the small of your back, but these are not normal circumstances. You have been handed not another chapter for the study you are writing, but another book altogether. While it incorporates electronic legends—and thus can be linked to the book you'll finish as soon as possible—this work gathers local history, mass hysteria, and fringe religious practices under its purview. Though you have to be careful not to put your cart before your horse, it could be the kind of academic work whose appeal extends to a broader audience, that levers its author out of her community college job into a position at a four-year university, that makes her money.

In front of you, the road climbs steeply. The car's engine whines as you force it up the mountain's slope. It has been a long time since you've felt this pure excitement about a project. Your dissertation, perhaps? After having lived your life for—for years, really, as if it were being told to you, as if you were a character being pushed through it by a middling writer's inexpert hand, suddenly, finally, you are on the verge of moving from second- to first-person, of taking on the telling of your life. You wonder if you can start writing this book as you're bringing the other one to a close.

The car crests the top of the slope. Now the road drops as dramatically as it rose, hooking sharply to the left a hundred yards below, in front of a block of exposed rockface. To your right, standing on the nominal shoulder, a figure flashes past, your headlights flaring on the white dress she wears. You whip your head around to verify what you think you saw, the great, rounded belly, the red wound across her throat, but she's gone, and anyway, the brake pedal has sunk all the way to the floor, and the car is gathering speed, hurtling toward the bare mountain. Surely, though, surely, the face you saw above that bloody line wasn't yours?

Into the Darkness, Fearlessly

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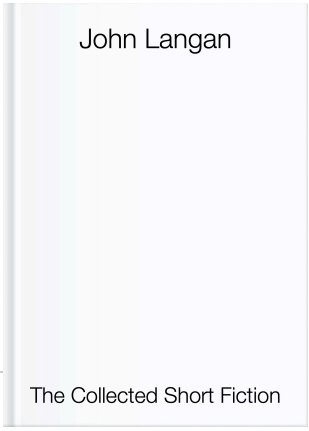

1

The morning after the police found the final piece of Linus Price, Wrighton Smythe, his frequent editor and occasional friend, opened the front door of his apartment and saw a manila folder lying on his doormat. With a sigh, Smythe bent to pick it up. It appeared his morning paper and cruller were going to have to be delayed. He made no effort to conceal his address, and it was not unheard of for aspiring writers to locate it and mail him their efforts; although a good few years had passed since anyone had gone so far as to hand-deliver their work. This manuscript was novel-thick, the folder bound to it with a pair of heavy pink rubber bands. There was no writing on either the front of the folder or the back. Smythe carried the delivery into his apartment, to the round table in his undersized living room upon which he placed the manuscripts awaiting his review. A modest pile of stories from writers well-established rose on the right side of the table; a pair of considerably-taller stacks from writers unknown loomed on the left. In between was a space, temporarily empty, where Smythe set whatever work was currently under his review. A pair of Pilot Precise V7 pens—blue ink—and a pad of yellow Post-It notes marked the top of what Smythe referred to as the operating theater. He dropped the new manuscript onto the table. Was it worth unwrapping? The odds were against it; though it was in exactly this way that Smythe had encountered Linus Price's first collection of stories, in a rectangular box wound about with packing tape. A spasm of grief and nostalgia pushed his fingers under the rubber bands, which he attempted to slide up and off the folder, but which resisted his efforts as if clinging to it. He had to pull the manuscript one way and the rubber bands the other before they slithered off, snapping his fingers as they released. "Shit!"

Smythe waved his hand, dropping the rubber bands, which twisted on the carpet. He opened the folder, and on the top sheet of paper, read

A GRAMMAR OF DREAD, A CATECHISM OF TERROR
BY
LINUS PRICE

Smythe's vision contracted to a dark tunnel at the other end of which the name, LINUS PRICE, appeared to float above the page. His ears filled with buzzing, the din of a field of locusts. His legs shook; he gripped the edge of the table to steady himself. The towered manuscripts to his left shifted.

Even as he was thinking, *There's no way*, the thought laying the track for the train of anger, of fury, that was lurching into motion in response to this outrage, this fucking *travesty*, his hands were lifting the cover sheet, feeling the flimsy onionskin that Linus had favored. His fingers traced the letters of the title, the name, incised in the paper by the strike of an electric typewriter's keys. The title's religious reference fit Linus, whose passion for esoteric metaphysical traditions had led to some of his best work. The page beneath bore an epigraph, unattributed: "And as God, turning within Himself, found a world to bring forth, so might man, turning within himself, find a world to bring forth." He had encountered the sentiment in others of Linus's stories. Smythe let the page drop, took up the next one. Single-spaced, one space after the periods, quarter-inch margins, prose an unbroken block. He scanned the middle of the text. "The lines of its roof, its sides broken by ornaments that would have been more appropriate to a Medieval castle—gargoyles resting their pointed chins on taloned hands, faces too-broad, vines that coiled like serpents—the house had been stuffed between its neighbors in a manner that suggested a bundle of papers shoved between two sturdy volumes of an encyclopedia." It certainly read like Linus. Cars clashing together, the train of Smythe's anger shrieked to a halt. He replaced the page on the manuscript.

How? He hadn't noticed anyone walking away from his front door, let alone lingering to one side or the other as he picked up the manuscript. And by anyone, he meant Dominika, Linus's wife—widow. While technically separated (a rupture Smythe had forecast years earlier) Linus's failure to

amend his abbreviated will (despite Smythe's urging that he do so) had left her executor of his meager estate. In the days since the e-mail that had brought the first word of Linus's murder, Smythe had contemplated the fate of his writing. In several interviews, Linus had claimed to have file cabinets full of stories in various stages of completion; though in other interviews, he also had declared writing an almost intolerable agony, so there was reason to take those brimming cabinets with a helping of salt. From having worked with him, Smythe knew that the man was a relentless, meticulous reviser, submitting additional changes to his stories even after the volumes containing them had gone to print. Yet every time he had asked him for a submission to an anthology, Linus had responded with two and sometimes three stories, each of them eight to ten thousand words long. His writing absorbed him, Linus had said, an ambiguous enough statement, but Smythe judged it likely he had left at least some work behind. Assuming it was publishable—and Smythe was confident that some if not most of it would be—there might be enough for one, even two posthumous collections. There wasn't much money to be made from such a project—at its most accessible, Linus's fiction had been an acquired taste, with much of it so hermetic as to be opaque to all save a small company of devoted readers. But while it was a principle difficult to keep in clear view in this era of diminishing book sales and The End Of Publishing As We Know It, there was more to the industry than the bottom line. There was the pursuit of art. If Linus's work had reached that goal for a relative few, cross that finish line it had, and Smythe thought such an accomplishment ought not to be forgotten.

For this reason, he had been unhappy to learn that Dominika had remained in charge of Linus's estate. In Smythe's experience, the amicable divorce was a fairy tale concocted by lawyers to encourage couples to begin a process that had more in common with a bare-knuckle boxing match. Even by that standard, Linus and Dominika's split had been brutal, an exchange of dirty blows that had continued long beyond the usual time limit, leaving the combatants bloody, broken, and bitter. Dominika had blamed Linus for misrepresenting himself as a famous writer during the course of their (mostly online) courtship, leading her to abandon her budding career as a model in Warsaw for a job waiting tables at a local diner. Linus had accused

Dominika of feigning affection for him in order to gain her green card. The separation proceedings had achieved a low level of notoriety in the local press, the consequence of a bored reporter wandering into the courtroom and being struck by the contrast between the tall, statuesque woman with the head of shining blond hair and the short, dumpy man with the stubbled head and protruding eyes. To be frank, there was a beauty-and-the-beast quality to their relationship, but the papers had exaggerated it, recasting Dominika as the beautiful, hapless immigrant ensnared by the unsavory, cunning writer—a writer of horror stories, to boot. She had emerged from the courtroom with a position as the weather-person for a local cable news channel, whose owner she was rumored to be dating. Linus gained nothing but the confirmation of the conviction he had long nurtured that the world was actively hostile to him. Smythe had little trouble believing that Dominika would be happy to let whatever manuscripts Linus had left behind molder in their filing cabinets unpublished; if she didn't consign them to the dumpster, or tip them into a metal drum and add gasoline and a match.

He had debated contacting her about the matter, but the situation was complicated by the fact that, a few years earlier, he had made a protracted and sloppy pass at Dominika. It was at the annual Weirdcon, which he'd convinced Linus to attend because it was being held in Albany, just up the river. Smythe had spent most of the weekend parked on a stool at the hotel bar, measuring his hours in shots of Johnnie Walker red, neat. It was, in his experience, the preferred method for enduring these events, whose attendance had long since moved from pleasure to duty. For every writer of merit who stopped to exchange a few words with him, a dozen or more, of varying degrees of inconsequence, lowered themselves beside him and attempted to engage him in a protracted conversation, usually on the merits of their work. If he was lucky, they at least stood him a round. This weekend, he had not been especially lucky. By the time he realized Dominika was standing beside him, waiting for the bartender to deliver her white wine, Linus nowhere to be seen, the drunk Smythe had maintained at a steady level just this side of belligerence had tipped over into naked hostility. The sight of Dominika leaning over the bar, her arms crossed over her full breasts, her round ass thrust out behind her in a tight denim skirt,

and Linus still absent—Smythe had glanced about the bar—had filled him with a sour rage. He wasn't sure exactly what he had said to her—it had begun as a question about whether she wouldn't prefer to join him in his room, away from all of this, and escalated to an extended description of the things he would do to her that had stretched from the sadistic to the masochistic. Throughout, she had watched him impassively, the fingers of her right hand tracing the stem of her wineglass. By the time Smythe had finished, his face was flushed, and he was panting. He had been certain that Dominika was going to dash her wine at him; either that, or grab his hand and take him up on his proposition. *Nothing ventured.…*

Instead, she had burst out laughing, laughter spraying from her lips as if Smythe had related the single funniest joke she ever had heard. Nor had she stopped: she had thrown her head back and continued to fill the bar with the sound of her mirth. It wasn't an explosion of good humor; it was harsh, mocking. His cheeks burning, Smythe had sat where he was, trying to compress himself into the smallest possible space he could. When he could stand her laughter no longer, he had swallowed the remainder of his drink, pushed himself up from his seat, and delivered a long string of invective to that grinning mouth, those pearled teeth. Though he liked to consider himself well-practiced and skilled at insult, Smythe's second outburst had evoked the same response from Dominika as the first, that braying laughter. Even through the Scotch mixed with his blood, Smythe had felt himself lessened in ways he didn't like to contemplate. He had flipped her the bird, and stalked out of the bar, the assembled eyes of the writers gathered there on him.

Afterwards, Linus did not confront him about the episode, which Smythe was anticipating and which he was preparing to deflect through an appeal to his inebriation and possibly Dominika's uncertain grasp of English. When nothing was said via phone, e-mail, or at their next meeting, Smythe started to tell mutual acquaintances that, in his view, Linus and Dominika's marriage was doomed. Smythe had not seen her since that weekend, for which he considered himself generally grateful but which made contacting her following her estranged husband's death seem more complicated.

It appeared, however, that his worrying had been for naught. Smythe supposed he couldn't blame Dominika if she wasn't inclined to deal with

him face to face, right now. As long as she had delivered this manuscript to him, he could excuse—anything. There wasn't much point in pretending he was going to accomplish anything with Linus's manuscript sitting here, was there? He lifted the heap of paper from the table and carried it to the couch, under the living room's picture window, where he settled down to read. A book written by a dead man: it was like the plot to one of Linus's stories.

2

Three (?) hours later, something flapping past the window caused Smythe to start. It hadn't been a bird, had it? Not one that big, not in the middle of the city. It must have been a trick of the light, a reflection from a passing car thrown on the glass. No matter—he needed a break, anyway.

Smythe lowered the manuscript. Had he been asked what he expected from Linus Price's latest work, his answer would have been, *More of the same*. More disaffected characters whose dead-end existences admitted them to scenarios in which the futility and hostility of life was made manifest through some cryptic supernatural agency. In one of his college classes, Smythe had encountered the argument that every writer rewrites the same story over and over again. While the statement was as reductive as most critical generalizations typically were, he had recognized a grain of truth to it, which three decades as an editor had confirmed. Writers were obsessives. The trick was to return to your obsessions in a way that made them seem fresh each time. From the beginning, Linus had achieved this feat. His new work was no exception. What was different—unprecedented—about it was the element of undisguised autobiography. Specifically, the manuscript dealt with the six months leading up to his murder.

Linus's death. Christ, there was a subject for a horror story, and not of Linus's stripe. This was no collection of hints and allusions wound in labyrinthine prose; this was brute blood and gore delivered in blunt, declarative sentences, the very kind of narrative against which he and Smythe had railed in print and online, the sensational, lowest-common-denominator type. Well, God was supposed to be a lousy writer, wasn't He?

It had started with a woman. Scratch that: it had started with whatever confluence of inclination and experience had caused the teenaged Linus

Price to haul his mother's old typewriter out of storage, balance it atop a card table, and begin composing the ancestors of the stories he one day would deliver to Smythe's doorstep. That joining of talent and memory had tangled a host of emotions with itself, chief among them arrogance, jealousy, and insecurity. There was nothing particularly noteworthy about a writer displaying these feelings; in Smythe's experience, it would have been remarkable for Linus not to have demonstrated them. Linus's problem lay in his inability to maintain any kind of balance or perspective on his feelings. When he received a positive review, it was proof that he was the best writer of his generation. When someone else earned a six-figure advance for their trilogy of vampire novels, it was symptomatic of the fundamental idiocy of the publishing industry. And when his stories and collections were passed over for the field's short list of awards, Linus plunged into black moods which released themselves online, in extended screeds on his blog or on those of the writers who had claimed the awards he deemed his. This last tendency had escalated over the last several years, immediately before, during, and in the aftermath of his marriage's collapse. Smythe had gone so far as to write him a brief, bluff e-mail suggesting that maybe it was time to stop confronting every billy-goat that trip-trapped across his bridge, but his caution had gone unheeded. Linus liked playing the troll; he appeared to take a perverse pleasure in living down to everyone's worst expectations. Smythe had been concerned, but Linus was far from the first writer to play the part of the obnoxious gadfly, and his irritation at Linus's refusal to heed his advice had kept him from repeating it.

If you had to select a more recent starting point for the chain of events that had resulted in Linus's murder, Smythe supposed it had to be last year's Blackwood Awards. Linus's most recent book, *Epistles to the Damned*, had garnered a nomination in the single-author collection category, along with work by a few, perennial favorites and *Medusa's Fruit*, a collection from a newcomer, Suzanne Kowalczyk. His friendship with Linus aside, there was no doubt in Smythe's mind that *Epistles to the Damned* merited and would win that year's award. All the reviews agreed that it was far and away Linus's best collection of stories, and since the Blackwood was decided by the votes of those attending that year's Weirdcon—held in Columbus—

Smythe assumed Linus had the category sewn up—as did Linus. What neither Smythe nor Linus had counted on was Suzy Kowalczyk making electronic copies of her collection free to whichever members of the convention requested it, with the result that more of them would read and cast their votes for her book than Linus's. So sure had Linus been that the award was his that, as the title of Suzy's book was being read out, he was already halfway to his feet. Once the name of the actual winner registered, he stood where he was, in the fourth row of a crowded room, while Suzy Kowalczyk rushed to the front of the room to accept her plaque and offer tearful thanks. After the ceremony had concluded, Smythe had pushed through the groups of people milling around to where Linus was sitting, slumped. Smythe had not won his category (original anthology) either, but though the loss piqued him, as they always did, Linus was stunned by the upset to his expectations. Putting aside his own disappointment, Smythe had squired Linus to the hotel bar, where over a couple of ludicrously expensive double-martinis, he had done his best to cheer up Linus, reminding him of all the great works of art that had gone similarly unrecognized. Where was *The Sound and the Fury*'s Pulitzer? Where was *Vertigo*'s Oscar? Where was *Let It Bleed*'s Grammy? Not such a bad club to be a member of, Smythe had told him. Linus had nodded, but said little. Eventually, Smythe had had to leave him in order to catch his ride to the airport.

That Linus's disappointment would spur him to action, and that said action would consist of a minimum of one, lengthy blog post on the woeful deficiencies of *Medusa's Fruit* was for Smythe a foregone conclusion. It was hardly the most gracious response, but neither was it unprecedented in the world of letters. In his somewhat less-invested estimate, Suzanne Kowalczyk's stories were decently written efforts, one or two of which gave evidence that she might develop in genuinely interesting directions. There was enough in her present volume, though, in terms of technique and theme, for someone inclined to do so to find fault with.

What Smythe was unprepared for was Linus's decision to ignore Suzy's writing and to focus instead on her appearance. Suzanne Kowalczyk was a tall, striking woman who wore her blond hair up and whose crisp skirt-and-jacket combinations lent her the appearance of a mid-level executive on the

rise. She was also similar enough to Dominika for the two to have passed as cousins, if not sisters, Irish twins. To his subsequent astonishment, Smythe failed to pick up on the resemblance until after Linus accused her of having used her “charms” to bamboozle an electorate unaccustomed to the attention—and manipulation—of so attractive an individual. During the resulting firestorm that swept their corner of the internet, another of Smythe’s writer-friends e-mailed him, “Wasn’t it enough for Linus to get his ass handed to him by Dominika once?” and the scales had dropped from his eyes. He had wanted to write to Linus, to try to make him see what he was doing, but Linus had always resisted any effort at analyzing his behavior that put it in doubt. There was nothing to do except let the conflagration burn itself out, which it had started to do, when Linus unleashed his second round of accusations. These focused on the brief afterword Suzy had written for her collection, in which she discussed writing its stories in the aftermath of the loss of her daughter, aged seven, to leukemia. This, Linus had opined, was an obvious attempt at playing on her readers’ emotions, which the attendees of Weirdcon had fallen for like so many rubes.

Smythe had thought the reaction to Linus’s first rant pronounced—Suzy Kowalczyk was well-liked and the Internet tended to fan what fires broke out on it—but that was nothing compared to the response to his follow-up remarks. There were no actual death-threats as such, but there were offers from an assortment of men and women from around the globe to inflict bodily harm on Linus the next time they encountered him. Linus’s reaction was to announce that he was reporting them all to the police, and then to do so. Especially once the facts in the case were made clear to them, though, the police were less than sympathetic. All that saved Linus from the debacle he had created was a new controversy that sprang up a few days later and sucked all the oxygen away from his. For a short while, Linus did his best to keep the argument alive, but by the time he decided to level his scorn at Suzy’s writing, no one was interested, anymore.

Smythe had hoped the lack of interest in his dissection of *Medusa’s Fruit’s* shortcomings would communicate to Linus that it was time to move on. Since everyone else had left the fight before he did, Smythe imagined he could count that as a kind of victory. A few weeks later, when the World

Fantasy Award nominations were announced and both Linus and Suzy's names were absent from the ballot, Smythe figured that would provide Linus something new to stew over.

Not until Linus's next stories appeared, six months later, did it become clear to Smythe that, rather than easing it, the passage of time had only deepened his outrage. He hadn't spoken much about it to Smythe, but then, he hadn't spoken much to Smythe, at all. Almost no one had seen or heard from Linus since his post-Blackwood meltdown. Every now and again, Smythe had considered dropping him an e-mail, just to touch base, but he had been occupied with a number of unanticipated projects whose short deadlines left him scant room for anything else. If he were telling the truth, he didn't mind the excuse to maintain his distance from Linus for a little while. Smythe had witnessed Linus go off the rails before, usually at a slight real or perceived from a writer he admired, but this last incident had seemed to carry him further away that in the past. Linus could contact him when he felt ready.

As the stories debuted, however, two at small online 'zines and one in *Lovecraft's*, Smythe found himself unable to imagine what, if anything, he would say to Linus, were he to answer the phone and hear his sometime friend's voice. It was the story in *Lovecraft's* that was the real problem, a piece about a beautiful émigré from an unnamed former Eastern-Bloc country whose picturesque house concealed a hideous secret: the child she kept bound and tortured in the attic, whose agonies were channeled through occult means to feed its mother's success as a painter. The actual details of the story were executed with as much tact, as much artistry, as anything Linus had written, but its significance was clear. This time around, Linus played coy, greeting the anger that sprung up virtually overnight with the insistence that he didn't know what anyone was talking about. He had written a work of fiction: that was all. His protests had sounded perfunctory, as if written to forestall any legal action from Suzanne Kowalczyk, who was, unsurprisingly, livid. Claiming to have contacted a lawyer, she did indeed threaten to sue Linus for libel. It was so much bluster—libel was next to impossible to prove in the U.S.—but Smythe could picture Linus blanching at the prospect of having to put yet another lawyer in his employ.

The second phase of Linus's feud with Suzy should have been the last, especially after she announced that she'd decided not to seek redress through the courts. But Smythe had had a queasy feeling the matter had yet to be settled, and this past week, that nausea had been justified. Suzy's neighbors had reported a man loitering outside her house, checking her mail, investigating her garbage, whose description matched Linus. Each time the police arrived, though, he was nowhere to be found. Suzy, herself, did not complain of a stalker, but that appeared to be because she had her own plans for him. Through means of which no one was certain, she had lured Linus into her house. Once the front door was closed, she had subdued him, possibly with a taser, stripped, bound and gagged him, and dragged him into her large kitchen. There, she had used her collection of very sharp, restaurant-grade cleavers and knives to joint him like a chicken. In the coroner's estimate, he had remained alive much further into the process than Smythe would have guessed possible. Suzy Kowalczyk had scattered his body throughout her house and fled for parts unknown; as yet, she had not been captured. During the initial investigation, the police had been afraid that she had taken Linus's head with her, since it was the only part of him they had been unable to locate. Only when an enterprising young cadet decided to unload the freezer was Linus's head discovered, wedged in a corner behind the rounded bulk of a frozen turkey.

What Linus had been doing at Suzy's house had not been discovered. Speculation had been voiced in some quarters that he had been staking out her place preliminary to assaulting her, which sounded plausible unless you had seen Linus. Suzy's motivations were considered self-evident: at the sight of the man who had bedeviled her this past year, she finally had snapped—which also sounded as if it made more sense than it did. There was nothing in her history to indicate that she would lose her mind, or that she would do so in so spectacular a fashion. Yes, that was the point to saying she had snapped, but Smythe judged such reasoning flimsy, weak.

And now, here was Linus's manuscript, which further muddied the waters. Smythe supposed you would have to call it a collection; although Linus had attempted to knit the stories within it (which included the *Lovecraft's* piece) into something approaching a larger narrative. The result was a study in resentment and paranoia, threaded through with gnostic mysticism.

Punishingly candid, beautifully-written sections about the breakup of his marriage, his descent into self-loathing and depression, his envy of and anger at Suzanne Kowalczyk's success, alternated with shorter, more elliptical and ornate sections concerning a fragment of gnostic writing on which Linus had become fixated. Supposedly discovered as part of the Nag Hammadi manuscripts, this sheet of papyrus had been included with the *Gospel of Thomas* until certain inconsistencies of grammar and syntax had caused other differences of content to become apparent. Debate continued as to whether the text to which the selection belonged had been part of the original library of early Christian texts, or if its origins lay with another sect. What was known as the demiurgic fragment began with the maxim Linus had chosen for the epigraph to his book: "And as God, turning within Himself, found a world to bring forth, so might man, turning within himself, find a world to bring forth." It moved on to a discussion of the word through which the Deity had accomplished His act of creation, a sample of the divine speech that was represented pictographically, as a pair of ovals, one contained within the other, the outer oval open on the left side, the inner on the right. With this word, the passage concluded, a man might give rise to that which was within him.

The conceit of this ancient text formed the basis for a brief parable about a man who came to the court of the great caliph, Haroun al-Rashid, before whose assembled courtiers the man declared he would replace the ruler this very night. When the court guards went to slay the man, the caliph stayed their hands and asked him what cause he had to speak so boldly. He had learned, the man replied, the word that is known as the egg, against whose power the messengers of paradise dared not contend. Ah, the caliph said, truly, that was a powerful weapon to have at one's disposal. But, he went on, it seemed to him that its possession was like gripping a sword by the blade, of no less danger to the one holding it than to those he faces. For who could say all that a man might find in himself? What man but he who was utterly at peace with himself would dare to grant exit to the residents of his soul? Nonetheless, the man said—albeit, with a tremor in his voice that had not been there, before—this night is your last upon this earth. If it be God's will, the caliph said, then so be it, and he gestured for his guards to allow the man to depart the court unmolested. Nor did Haroun al-Rashid speak of

the matter again. However, a number of the caliph's most trusted advisors, disturbed by so blatant a threat to their ruler, gave orders that the man should be followed. This proved more difficult than those advisors anticipated, with the result that the man's lodgings in one of the poorer quarters of the city were not discovered until early the next morning. The guards who broke open the door were greeted by a scene of horror—the man torn to shreds as if by a pack of wild dogs. What had done so crouched in the middle of the room, licking the blood pooled on the floor. None of the guards would describe it, but when they slew it with their swords, the neighbors heard the sound of an infant shrieking. Those advisors who were summoned to view the thing ordered it burnt and its ashes scattered. To no man who was part of these events did sleep ever come easily, again.

In turn, this parable was succeeded by the *Lovecraft's* story, which Linus had positioned between a pair of lengthy expository paragraphs in which he did his best to explain his fiction as a means of representing the truth behind Suzanne Kowalczyk's lies. The second paragraph led into a kind of prose-poem in which Linus portrayed himself meditating ceaselessly on the double-ovals, what the man in his story had called the egg. If this was the avenue by which creation had come to be, then might there not be some trace of it remaining in that creation? For a long time, he searched for such a trace. And then, one day, while he was sitting at his local diner prolonging a cup of coffee and a slice of apple pie, the accidental flash of sunlight on a serving platter had caught his eye, and like Jacob Böhme, he had seen through to the center of things. Before he understood what his lips and tongue were doing, they were uttering that word, the egg, whose sound was almost silent. He looked down, and found his mug filed to the steaming brim with fine, strong coffee, not the watery mix he'd been sipping for the last half-hour. On the plate next to it sat a thick slice of apple pie, the buttery taste of whose flaky crust blended perfectly with the crisp sweetness of its filling. Unable to believe fully what had happened—what he had made happen—Linus left the diner and went straight home. There, he had locked the door, drawn the blinds, and commenced experimenting with the word. He was somewhat vague as to exactly what uses he had put his discovery; although he mentioned causing a tank full of half a dozen white and orange goldfish to appear on his kitchen counter. At the end of his

session, Linus had been convinced of the authenticity of his breakthrough. Granted such an ability, Linus wrote, it would have been easy enough to indulge in more venal pursuits, to make himself rich, to surround himself with women beside whom Dominika would appear the slattern he had found her to be. To do so, as he saw it, would be to admit a kind of defeat. His life's goal had been nothing more and nothing less than to earn a modest living through his writing, and he still deemed it a worthy ambition. What the word could give him was a means to make the world see the truth in what he had been saying about Suzanne Kowalczyk, namely, that she was a manipulative, talentless fraud.

How like Linus, Smythe thought. *He writes a fantasy in which he grants himself ultimate power, and the best use he can think of putting it to is settling a score*. The section concluded with Linus turning off all the lights in his apartment, seating himself cross-legged on the living room floor, and commencing the process of opening the door to what was inside him. The manuscript ended with a narrative written in the form of a journal. Its style, Smythe judged, was Poe filtered through Beckett, terse paranoia. There were no proper names, only pronouns and generic descriptions. Its action was disjointed. Its narrator received a visit from a beautiful woman with whom he had immediate and ferocious sex. Later, he wandered streets whose names were familiar but whose houses were strange. He felt feverish. He found a park and sat on one of its benches. The woman reappeared beside him. They had some kind of sex on the bench. When they were done, he saw a figure watching them across the park. It was short, dressed in a winter coat with the hood up. He could not see its face. Later, he saw the figure at the end of a street he could not remember walking to. It ran down an alley between two houses. The way it moved made him feel sick. He approached the end of the street. The door of the second-to-last house on the left was open. The woman was standing in it. She was naked. The small figure in its coat slouched behind her. He turned up the walk towards them. That was the end of the manuscript.

Jesus. Smythe pushed himself up off the couch. As a rule, he was leery of psychoanalytic readings of a writer's work, but in this case… He shook his head, deposited Linus's manuscript on the work table. No doubt, the thing was publishable—the sensation value would probably move more copies of

it than anything else Linus had written. But as a last book, a summation of his career, it cast a light over his body of work that was, to put it mildly, less than flattering. Perhaps there was something else, another collection of stories that might better serve as Linus's final publication. He would have to ask Dominika about it when he saw her tonight, at Linus's wake.

3

Smythe had expected Linus's send-off to be a somber affair, but he was unprepared for the full, depressing extent of it. For one thing, both the funeral parlor Dominika had selected and the neighborhood in which it was located had, to put it mildly, seen better days. *Which one of us hasn't?* Smythe thought as he steered up the potholed street to the tall old house. *Especially Linus*. Aside from a wire garbage can whose side bore a long, jagged gouge, the curb before the funeral parlor was empty. Smythe parked his Metro directly in front of the place, and before he left the car, locked all its doors. He could not conceive of even the most desperate of criminals finding anything of value in or inside his vehicle, but the prospect of being proved wrong and having to walk the blocks to the nearest bus stop was sufficiently unpleasant for him to secure the car. A scrape on the pavement behind him jerked his head around. A scrap of newspaper was being hustled along the sidewalk by a breeze too slight for him to notice. There was nothing in the shape of the paper to remind him of a large, pale crab scuttling over the concrete. He hurried up wooden stairs that announced his climb in a series of dull booms, into the funeral parlor.

Inside, the air was clotted with yellow light that made the narrow hallway more, rather than less, difficult to distinguish. A podium whose carver had doubtless intended its sinuous leg as a vine, and not the tentacle it actually resembled, held aloft a marble composition book whose repurposing as a Book of Remembrance was announced by the spiky handwriting on its cover. Opening the book, Smythe was more surprised than he would have expected to find the first page empty. Perhaps the entries began further in…? No: the rest of the pages were equally blank. Granted, Linus had made his fair share of enemies, but surely, at a moment such as this, a flag of truce could be raised over old battlefields, the scars of old wounds covered over? Apparently not, if the pristine pages, the silent hallway, were

to be believed. A surge of emotion that was equal parts pity and outrage rose in his throat. He seized the Bic lying beside the notebook and wrote his name in large, jagged letters that crossed a half-dozen of the page's pale blue lines. Beside it, he wrote, "Into the Darkness, Fearlessly!" It was the phrase with which he had titled his laudatory review of Linus's first collection of stories, and if it did not quite fit the manner of Linus's death, Smythe intended it to evoke that earlier, happier time.

Spurred by indignation, he strode down the hall to the viewing room. A piece of paper with the word, "Prise," magic-markered on it had been taped to the wall to the right of the doorway. Smythe paused at the threshold, confronted by one end of Linus's coffin, which crowded most of the doorway. Its lid closed, the coffin was plain, unvarnished wood, no railing along its side for pallbearers to grip. A small, potted cactus rested on its opposite end. There was no point to the sour taste that filled Smythe's mouth. Linus had been possessed of, at most, minimal resources; what he was looking at was what Linus's bank account would cover. In fact, it was probably more than he would have expected Linus to afford. The cactus was a bit much, even if he could imagine Linus snorting at it. He squeezed around the coffin, noting as he did that there was no kneeler in front of it. Already, he had seen Dominika at the other end of the small room, seated in one of the folding chairs lining the back wall, something on the chairs to either side of her. He ran his hand over the coffin's smooth surface, wishing he could think of a remark that didn't reek of sentimentalism. He had attended the wakes of a number of writers, most of them figures he had grown up reading, met, and occasionally published at the ends of their careers. A few had been his contemporaries, the victims of accidents or aggressive cancers. Linus was the only writer—the only person—Smythe had known who had been murdered, and so horribly, at that. A weight seemed to pull down the center of his chest. He supposed he should speak to Dominika, offer his condolences, maybe discuss Linus's manuscript with her. He turned towards her, and what he saw made him jump back into Linus's coffin, which gave a muffled thud and rocked on its supports. On the chair to his widow's left sat Linus's head, resting on its truncated neck. The eyes were closed, the mouth was closed, the expression slack. Smythe struggled for breath. "You," he managed. "You."

Dominika laughed, that same, bray she'd visited upon him years ago, coarsened by the wine she'd consumed from the bottles open on the chair to her right. "Oh, Smythe," she said. "You think—?" She nodded at Linus's head. "This—?" More laughter. She rested her hand on top of Linus's head in a gesture almost tender. "It's a model," she said in a stage whisper.

"Wha—a what?" Smythe said.

"A model," Dominika said, "you know, like a mannequin. I had it made when the police could not find the real thing. Actually, it was after they looked and looked, and it was still missing. I waited to have the funeral, because I wanted to bury all of him, you know? Who wants to be buried without his head? But then the detective says to me, 'I don't know if we are going to find your late husband's head.' He thought the woman ran away with it. So, I decided not to wait, anymore. I went on the Internet, found a man who could do this, and here it is." She slapped the head. "It was not cheap, either. Of course, the minute, the second after I hung up the phone with the man telling me the thing is done, who calls but the police? I couldn't tell them I didn't need their head, I had one of my own, so I decided this one would keep me company while I sit here. Linus would approve, I think."

No doubt he would have; though I'm not so sure about your outfit. Dominika's clothes were mourning-black, but her high-necked blouse, short skirt, and thigh-high boots lent her the appearance of a dominatrix. *Scratch that—he would have loved it*. Smythe seated himself on the other side of the wine bottles. A scattering of plastic cups surrounded them. Smythe selected a cup. "Do you mind?"

Dominika waved the hand holding her own cup. "Go ahead."

The bottle was tall, heavy, the label one Smythe did not recognize. A vineyard in Bulgaria, apparently. The liquid that poured out of it was thick, ruby bordering on black. Its nose was the grape of children's fruit juice. Smythe raised his cup and said, "To Linus." He waited for Dominika to join his toast; when she did not, he put his cup to his lips. The wine was cloyingly sweet, more like cough syrup than alcohol. Nonetheless, he served himself a second cup of it. If he was going to be sitting here with Dominika, he fancied he would need all the assistance he could get. After

he consumed that cup, and set himself up with a third, he said, “Before, you mentioned the police. Has there been any more news—”

“Nothing.” Dominika shook her head. “The woman is gone, vanished.”

“I assume they told you—”

“Oh yes, I know everything. They were fucking, and this is what happened.”

“They were—what?” Smythe thought of Linus’s book, that final story.

“But Linus was Linus, and you know…”

“Wait—who said they were—the police told you this?”

“No,” Dominika said. “It’s obvious, isn’t it?”

“Certainly not,” Smythe said. “Linus hated that woman. He detested her. He thought she was a fraud.”

“And such things don’t make sparks?” Dominika said. “What we detest, we also desire. I thought you would know that.”

Smythe ignored the implications of her axiom. Instead, he refilled his cup. “Linus was not involved with that woman.”

“He told you this?”

“He didn’t have to,” Smythe said. “I read the manuscript.”

Dominika frowned. “The manuscript?”

“The book—Linus’s book.”

“Ah. What did it say?”

“That he despised Suzanne Kowalczyk.”

“Which would have made the fucking better.”

“Linus was not having sex with her.”

“Why is this so upsetting to you?”

“Because it isn’t true,” Smythe said. “This isn’t some relationship gone horribly wrong. This is murder.”

“You don’t have to worry about me,” Dominika said. “It does not bother me to think that Linus was fucking another woman. Good for him, you know? Except when it wasn’t.”

“I’m not worried about you. I’m concerned with my friend.”

Dominika patted the head. “Your friend doesn’t need your concern.” She listed towards Smythe. “Actually, his cock wasn’t bad. I’m sure she enjoyed it.”

Was the bottle empty, already? Smythe hardly felt the effects of the wine at all. He replaced the empty, selected one mostly full.

Dominika continued. “That was why I turned you down all those years ago, my husband’s cock.”

Smythe’s cheeks flushed. “This is hardly the place—”

“Linus doesn’t care,” Dominika said. “He wouldn’t care if I fucked you right now. Would you?” she asked the head, whose features seemed to have taken on an appearance of distaste. “You see,” she said, “nothing.”

“I was wondering if I could speak to you about Linus’s book,” Smythe said.

“His book?”

“The manuscript—what was it? *A Grammar of Dread, A Catechism of Terror.*”

“What a title!” Dominika said, slapping her leg. “He was very good with titles.”

“He was. I’m not sure if you’ve read the collection—”

“None of it. I never read any of Linus’s things.”

“You never—”

Dominika shrugged. “Linus’s stories were difficult. He told me so, himself. He was proud of it. ‘Not just anyone can understand my stories:’ that was what he said. I said it was more like, ‘Not anyone can understand any of your stories.’ He didn’t think that was so funny. But come on! You read them. You know what I’m talking about. The long sentences. The strange words. The people in them no one could like. Sometimes, he would tell me his stories—that only made me glad I hadn’t read them.”

For an instant—less—Smythe was possessed by the absolute, unshakable conviction that the woman he was speaking with was not Dominika Price. She might be Suzanne Kowalczyk—no, she was someone else, altogether.

Quickly as it had come, the feeling passed, and Smythe swallowed another (his eighth? ninth?) cup of wine. “Linus Price,” he said, “was a great writer.”

“So you say,” Dominika said. “Who knows? Maybe he was. But he was not a very good writer, I think.”

“What is your position, then, on publishing his final work? If,” Smythe added, “it is his final work.”

“How should I know?”

“Haven’t you gone through his things?”

“Why should I?”

“Because you’re his executor—executrix.” Smythe struggled with the word, his tongue suddenly full of the alcohol he’d consumed. “It’s your responsibility.”

“To whom?” Dominika said. “Linus is dead.”

“To posterity,” Smythe said, a still-trickier word. “To his readers.”

“What? Ten people? That was something else he used to say, when he was depressed: ‘I’m lucky if ten people buy my books.’”

“If you feel this way, then why did you give me his manuscript?”

“What manuscript?”

“The book, Linus’s last book. *A Grammar of Terror*—no, *A Grammar of Dread, A Catechism of Terror*.”

“I didn’t.”

“What do you mean, you didn’t?”

“What I said. I didn’t give you Linus’s book.”

“But I found it at my front door this morning.”

“So?”

“Did you give it to someone to give to me?”

“Smythe,” Dominika said, “I haven’t seen the fucking book, okay? Maybe Linus’s wife gave it to you.”

“His wife?”

“Her—the woman who killed him. Whatever.”

“She was hardly his Goddamned wife.”

“Yes, yes. It doesn’t matter. Whatever you want to do with Linus’s book, you do.”

Smythe choked down his anger. “Of course, I would ensure you received the proceeds from such a project.”

“With nothing for you?”

“I—”

“It’s okay,” Dominika said. “I don’t need this money. You can have it.”

“I wouldn’t—”

Dominika waved her free hand. “Shhh. We’ll drink to it.”

“All right,” Smythe said. He lifted the bottle from which he’d been serving himself, found it, too, empty. He set it down, chose a third. “To the beginning,” he said over his brimming cup, “of a beautiful friendship.”

“Don’t get crazy,” Dominika said.

“It’s—never mind.”

Another portion of the syrupy wine, and a wave of intoxication rolled over him, as if that last amount had tipped an internal scale, plunging him into a full drunk. His head seemed to rise above his body, which felt simultaneously hot, heavy, and hollow, as if he were no more than the suit and shirt he was wearing, held in place solely by its purpose. Linus’s coffin appeared mere feet away, the cactus at its head large as a bush. Smythe stretched out his right hand and slid his fingers over the coffin’s side. He turned his head to Dominika to remark on this—the room swaying lazily as he did—and saw that her neck had grown, carrying her head a good foot, two, past the edge of her high-necked blouse. Her lids were lowered, her lips parted. She had set her cup down, and was playing with the top button of her blouse with her left hand, while her right flopped in her lap.

Despite the wine, Smythe was instantly, painfully erect, his cock tenting his trousers, throbbing in time with the pulse pounding at his temples, his throat. His mouth was dry, his hands trembling. When Dominika’s hand made the jump to his lap, the shock it produced did nothing to stop his

hands from unbuckling his belt, unbuttoning and unzipping his pants. *For Christ's sake, you're in a fucking funeral home!* It didn't matter: Dominika's fingers had made their way under the waistband of his briefs and encircled his cock. His fingers had pushed up her skirt, and found her pantiless, shaved, soaking. He half-fell off his chair, angling towards her. Without losing hold of him, she scooted her ass to the edge of the chair, then pulled him into her. Enclosed in her wet heat, he gasped. He grabbed the edges of her blouse, tore it open. A black, lace bra supported her creamy breasts. His fingers worked underneath the underwire, pulled the bra up and over, revealing her large, rosy nipples. His mouth descended on them. Somewhere above, Dominika groaned and uttered words in a language Smythe didn't know. Her hips ground against his. He took her nipple between his lips, sucked hard on it. Dominika yelped, pushed him backwards, riding him off the chair into a kind of half-crouch on the floor. She leaned into him, her right hand slapping Linus's coffin. He thought she was keeping time with his thrusts, but she pressed forward more, threatening to overbalance him. He flung his hands to the sides and braced himself against the coffin. His knees were screaming with pressure, his cock dulling. With her left hand, Dominika caught his collar and pulled him over and to the side. They landed hard, Smythe on top, Dominika already moving under him. His cock stiffened, the pressure at its base returning. Dominika's words had fallen into a rhythmic pattern. She pushed her right hand between them, around and under Smythe's balls. Something scraped along the flesh behind them; her fingernails, he thought, his cock close to bursting with the touch. A pinprick, several, tickled his skin, and he remembered the cactus ornamenting Linus's coffin just as Dominika drove the needles she'd freed from it into him. The pain was astonishing, and seemed to combine with the orgasm that convulsed him. He threw his head back, and from the corner of his eye, saw the model of Linus's head, its eyes open, yellow fluid streaming from them. He recoiled in horror, striking his head on the coffin. Supernovae flared behind his eyes, and were replaced by darkness.

IV

Smythe woke the next morning with a splitting headache, a consequence of the four double-scotches he'd sent following the wine once he'd arrived home. (However that had been; his memory of that particular detail was a blank. Please, Christ, someone at the funeral home had called a cab for him.) The buzz had been wearing off, and he'd justified the additional alcohol as a salute to the man he'd once christened the great hope of horror fiction. Not to mention, as a salve for the pain behind his balls, whose sharpness made him draw his breath in sharply every time he moved. No doubt, Linus would have had a sharp remark to offer his pain. (Not that he would have delivered it to his face, of course: he would have passed it to some mutual acquaintance he could be sure would transmit it to Smythe.) Smythe considered a swallow of the hair of the dog, but opted instead for a trio of aspirin crunched between his teeth, their bitterness welcome after the taste he'd awakened with. The aspirin seemed to help, loosening the vice around his forehead, blunting the pain between his legs. His stomach was too scorched for anything other than a glass of lukewarm tapwater. Nothing would have pleased him more than to return to bed, write this day off as a loss, but a host of deadlines were bearing down on him, and he could not afford another lost day. Well, he'd worked through the aftermaths of worse binges than this one, hadn't he? He shuffled towards his computer.

Once he'd (gingerly) seated himself, though, the first e-mails of the day brought news that made his vision blur. One of the writers he'd solicited for a reprint for the latest volume of *Fatal Frights* had sent a reply declining his offer. Mixed in with the pain, Smythe felt a certain astonishment: had any writer ever refused his invitation to be part of *Fatal*? He could not recall one. As a rule, writers—horror writers especially—were vain, insecure creatures, only too eager to accept whatever crumbs of approval were doled out to them by whoever set him-or herself up as arbiter of value. It was hard to imagine this fellow could be any different. Smythe wondered if he'd done something to offend the man, some (drunken) display at one convention or another. He couldn't remember. *Well, fuck*. This was going to leave a ten-plus-thousand-word hole in his book, which was due in little over a month. It wasn't as if there was a surplus of other stories from which to choose; he'd only selected this one because the year's pickings were so slender.

Of course, there was Linus's manuscript. Perhaps one of its stories might be carved into a shape that would plug the gap. Leaning on his desk, he pushed himself to his feet. For once, he was glad of his modest apartment: moving from the computer to the work table was an exercise in agony; he shuddered to think what a trip from one room to another in a larger place, let alone a house, would feel like. By the time he reached the table, his groin was singing with pain. Sweat spilled down his face; his breathing was labored. He placed his hands to either side of Linus's manuscript and leaned over it, waiting for his nerves to cool. When they had, he focused on the top page of Linus's collection, dotted with his sweat.

It was blank. *Must have set it back upside-down*. He turned the sheet over, and found the other side blank, too. As were both sides of the page underneath, and the one under that—as were all the pages of what had been Linus's manuscript. Sure he was suffering a momentary occlusion of his vision, Smythe flipped through the book a second, then a third time. The pages remained blank. "What the fuck?" he said. "What the fuck? What the FUCK!" He flung the book across the table. It struck the nearer tower of unread stories and sent it toppling into its companion, spilling their collected manuscripts onto the floor in an avalanche of paper. "GodDAMN it!" Before he could stop himself, Smythe had swept the pile of stories from established writers off the table, as well.

Dominika. That was the answer. During their conversation last night, she had realized the mistake she'd made in giving him Linus's final collection. Hadn't he thought she seemed different, everything about her more studied (even her accent, which had verged on a parody of itself)? No doubt, the stress of her act leaking through. So once she was confident that he was sufficiently impaired, she'd driven him home, thus allowing herself entry to his apartment, where she had retrieved the manuscript. To delay his discovering her duplicity, she'd replaced Linus's book with one of the reams of paper Smythe kept under his printer. No doubt, she already had contacted a number of high-powered agents to discuss what money might be made from the collection. In the meantime, he had lost the opportunity to bring Linus's last book out in a fashion befitting it, and he was up shit creek, very possibly without a paddle, on the next *Fatal Frights*. What a perfect fucking disaster.

Someone spoke. Smythe turned, his injury flaring. There was no one with him—as of course there wouldn't have been. The voice spoke again, whatever it was saying muffled, diffuse. Was it something on the computer? He checked, but only his e-mail was open. The TV was off, yet the voice continued. His neighbors to either side were elderly, quiet, and anyway, the words didn't sound as if they were carrying through the walls. They seemed closer.

Surely it couldn't be coming from the kitchen, from the freezer. That would be too much, more of a breach of good taste than anyone could tolerate. Yet when he pulled back the freezer door, the ice inside crackling, there was the mannequin head of Linus. Despite himself, Smythe retreated a step. "Fucking…" At least the voice had stopped (some kind of tape recorder, set to a timer?). The eyes, he was oddly relieved to see, were closed. What the hell was he supposed to do with this?

When the model's mouth fell open, Smythe assumed it was a consequence of the sudden change in temperature caused by his holding the door open—which he also assumed was responsible for the thick, yellow liquid that dribbled over its lower lip onto the freezer's floor. *Great—probably some kind of toxic chemical*. When the tongue spasmed, however, and the lower jaw twitched upward, Smythe stumbled backwards. *There's no way,* he thought, and it was true, there wasn't, this had to be a prank, a hoax. But by Christ, it did look real, the lips trembling madly as they tried to frame a word there was no way they could speak. Even with his heart hammering, Smythe could appreciate the level of craftsmanship that had gone into this thing.

The sound that uttered from Linus's mouth was not a word. Nor was it mere noise. Smythe felt himself pressed upon from all directions at once, as if the very air had tightened against his skin. His ears filled with a syllable that rang like a cathedral bell, the way the very first word must have troubled the infinite silence that had preceded it. Phosphorous-white light bleached the room around him. He squinted, but it did no good. It was as if the light was inside him. The sensation of fullness in his ears increased from dull to sharp, stabbing pain. He cupped his hands to his head as something gave first in his left, then his right ear. Crying out, he doubled over. He

couldn’t hear himself. His hands were wet. He held the right up in front of him, saw blood streaking his palm.

Whether the sound was continuing to issue from Linus’s mouth, or Smythe’s brain was stuck replaying the noise that had exceeded it, he didn’t know. But, especially now that that the brilliance was ebbing from the air around him, he was possessed by the urge to flee not just the kitchen, but his apartment, the building that contained it. He didn’t worry about locking the door behind him; he wasn’t sure he’d shut it. He didn’t bother waiting for the elevator; the pain that raged between his legs as he descended the five flights of stairs did not seem too large a price to pay for exiting this place.

Smythe emerged from the front lobby into a gray day. Already, he was starting to trace a line of reasoning whose starting point was Dominika spiking his wine with some variety of long-lasting hallucinogen. The chalk skidded off the board, however, at the sight across the street that greeted him.

It was a house, one that had not been there when he left the building to attend Linus’s wake last night, or on any of the roughly five thousand other days he’d walked out the front door. *It’s a gingerbread house*, he thought, which was not quite accurate but which encapsulated the emotion its appearance evoked in him, mingled wonder and terror at having confronted a dwelling from one of the Grimm brothers’ darker stories. The lines of its roof, its sides broken by ornaments that would have been more appropriate to a Medieval castle—gargoyles resting their pointed chins on taloned hands, faces too-broad, vines that coiled like serpents—the house had been stuffed between its neighbors in a manner that suggested a bundle of papers shoved between two sturdy volumes of an encyclopedia. Open wide, its front door framed a tall, naked woman with long, blond hair who was neither Dominika nor Suzanne Kowalczyk. The knives she held at her sides were large, curved.

What sent Smythe running across the street, up the front walk, and into her terrible embrace was not some spontaneous *liebestod*. It was the figure he met as he turned to go back into his building. Small as a young child, it was wearing a heavy winter coat whose hood had been pulled up far enough to obscure its face. Smythe was about to tell it to get out of the way when it

raised its gray hands to either side of the hood and drew it back. That couldn’t be—surely, that wasn’t—

It was. Oh, it was.

Children of the Fang

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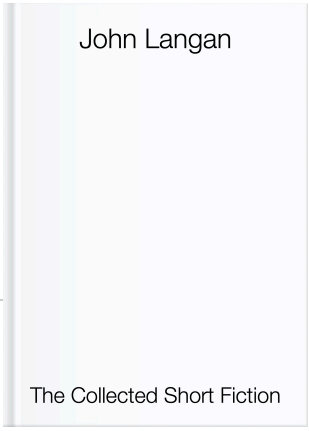

The smells of the basement: dust, mildew, and the faint, plastic stink of the synthetic rug Grandpa had spread down here two decades ago. The round, astringent odor of mothballs stuffed in the pockets of the clothes hung in the closet. A distant, damp earthiness, the soil on the other side of the cinderblock walls. The barest trace of cinnamon, mixed with vanilla; underneath them, brine.

The sounds of the basement: the furnace, first humming expectantly, then switching on with a dull roar. The rug scraping under her sneakers. What Rachel insisted was the ring of water in the water tank, though her father swore there was no way she could be hearing that. The house above, its timbers creaking as the air in its rooms warmed.

The feel of the basement: openness, as if the space that she knew was not as large as the house overhead was somehow bigger than it. When they were kids, Josh had convinced her that there were secret doors concealed in the walls, through which she might stumble while making her way along one of them. If she did, she would find herself in a huge, black, underground cavern full of mole-men. The prospect of utter darkness had not troubled her as much as her younger brother had intended, but the mole-men and the endless caves to which he promised they would drag her had more than made up for that. Even now, at what she liked to think of as a self-possessed twenty-five, the sensation of spaciousness raised the skin of her arms in gooseflesh.

The look of the basement: the same dark blur that occulted all but the farthest edges of her visual field. Out of habit, she switched her cane from right hand to left and flipped the light switch at the bottom of the stairs. The resulting glow registered as only the slightest lightening in her vision. It

didn’t matter: she hardly needed the cane to navigate the boxed toys and clothes stacked around the basement floor, to where Grandpa’s huge old freezer squatted in the corner opposite her. For what she had come to do, it was probably better that she couldn’t see.

2. THE TAPE (1): IRAM

Around her and Josh, the attic, hushed as a church. Off to one side, their grandfather’s trunk, whose lack of a lock Josh, bold and nosy at sixteen as he’d ever been, had taken as an invitation to look inside it. Buried beneath old clothes, he’d found the tape recorder and cassettes. Rachel slid her index finger left over three worn, plastic buttons, pressed down on the fourth, and the tape recorder started talking. A snap and a clatter, a hiss like soda fizzing, and a voice, a man—a young man’s, someone in his teens, rendered tinny and high by time and the age of the cassette: “Okay,” he said, “you were saying, Dad?”

Now a second speaker, Grandpa, the nasal complaint of the accent that had followed him north to New York state from Kentucky accentuated by the recording. “It was Jerry had found the map and figured it showed some place in the Quarter, but it was me worked out where, exactly, we needed to head.”

“That’s Grandpa,” Josh said, “And…Dad?”

“It isn’t Dad,” Rachel said.

“Then who is it?”

“I’m not sure,” she said. “I think it might be Uncle Jim.”

“Uncle Jim?”

“James,” she said, “Dad’s younger brother.”

“But he ran away.”

“Obviously, this was made before,” she said, and shushed him.

“—the company would have been happy to have the two of you just take off,” Uncle Jim was saying.

“Well,” Grandpa was saying, “there was time between the end of work on one site and the beginning of work on the next. It’s true, though: we

couldn’t wander off for a week. If we said there was a spot we wanted to investigate, the head man was willing to give us a day or two, but that was because he thought we meant something to do with oil.”

“Not the Atlantis of the Sands,” Jim said.

“Iram,” Grandpa said. “Iram of the Pillars, *Iram dat al-'imad*.”

“Right,” Jim said, “Iram. So I guess the sixty-four-thousand-dollar question is, Did you find it?”

Their grandfather did not answer.

“Dad?” Jim said.

“Oh, we found it, all right,” Grandpa said, his voice thick.

3. THE FREEZER (1): EARLY INVESTIGATIONS

Enamel-smooth, the surface of the freezer was no colder than anything else in the basement. Once he understood this, at the age of nine, Josh declared it evidence that the appliance was malfunctioning. Rachel corrected him. “If it was cold,” she said, “it would mean it wasn’t properly insulated.” She softened her tone. “I know it sounds weird, but it’s supposed to feel like this.” She had tested the freezer with her cane, drawing the tip along the side of it and knocking every six inches. “There’s something in it,” she announced. She set the cane on the floor and pressed her ear to the appliance. She could hear ice sighing and shifting. When the motor clicked to life and she placed her hands on the lid, the metal trembled under her fingertips.

Six feet long by three high by three wide, the freezer served her and Josh as a prop when they were young, and a topic of conversation as they aged. She would lie, first on top of, then beside the metal box with one ear against it, trying to decipher the sounds within, while Josh ran his fingers along the rubber seam that marked the meeting of lid and container. Both of them studied the trio of padlocked latches that guaranteed Grandpa’s insistence that the freezer’s contents were off-limits. Josh inspected the bolts which fastened the locks to the freezer, the makes of the padlocks, their keyholes; she felt for gaps between the heads of bolts and the latches, between the latches and the freezer, tugged on the padlocks to test the strength of their

hold. After speculating about diamonds, or some kind of rare artifact, or a meteor, she and Josh had decided the freezer most likely housed something connected to their grandfather's old job. Grandpa had made his money helping to establish the oil fields in Saudi Arabia, in what was known as the Empty Quarter. As he never tired of reminding them, it was among the most inhospitable places on the planet. It was, however, a desert, whose daily temperature regularly crossed the three-digit mark. What he could have brought back from such a land that would require an industrial freezer remained a mystery.

INTERLUDE: GRANDPA (1): THE HIPPIE WARS

The house in which Rachel and her brother were raised was among the largest in Wiltwyck. However, its second storey belonged entirely to their grandfather. Within the house, it was accessed by a staircase which rose from the front hall to a door at which you were required to knock for entry; outside the house, a set of stairs that clung to the southern wall brought you to a small platform and another door on which you were obliged to rap your knuckles. There was no guarantee of entry at either door; even if she and Josh had heard Grandpa clomping across his floor in the heavy workshoes he favored, he might and frequently did choose to ignore their request for admission.

When he opened the door to them, they confronted a gallery of closed rooms against whose doors her cane knocked. Should either of them touch one of the cut-glass doorknobs, Grandpa's "You let that alone" was swift and sharp. To her, Josh complained that Grandpa's part of the house smelled funny, a description with which Rachel did not disagree. It was the odor that weighted the air after their father performed his weekly scrub of the bathroom, the chlorine slap of bleach. Heaviest in the hallways, it was slightly better in the sitting room to which Grandpa led them. There, the couch on which she and Josh positioned themselves was saturated with a sweet scent spiced with traces of nutmeg, residue of the smoke that had spilled from the bowl of Grandpa's pipe for who knew how long. Once he had settled himself opposite them, in a wooden chair whose sharp creaks seemed to give warning of its imminent collapse, he conducted what amounted to a brief interview with each of them. How was school? What

had they learned today? What was one thing they'd learned this past week they could explain to him? In general, she and her brother were happy to submit to the process, because it ended with a reward of hard candy, usually lemon-drops that made her cheeks pucker, but sometimes cherry Life Savers or atomic fireballs.

Once in a while, the questioning did not go as smoothly. As time passed, Rachel would understand that this was due to her grandfather's moods—generally neutral if not pleasant—which could take sudden swings in a hostile, and nasty, direction. Should she and Josh find themselves in front of him during one of these shifts, the hard candies would be replaced by a lecture on how the two of them were squandering the opportunities they hadn't deserved in the first place, and were going to end up as nothing but hippies. That last word, he charged with such venom that Rachel assumed it must be among the words she was not permitted to say. If Josh had done something particularly annoying, she might use it on him, and vice-versa. Long after her parents had clarified the term's meaning, it retained something of the opprobrium with which Grandpa had infused it—so much so that, when Josh, aged twelve, answered the old man's use of it by declaring that he didn't get what the big deal about hippies was, Rachel flinched, as if her brother had shouted "Motherfucker!" at him.

Given Grandpa's reaction, he might as well have. Already sour, his voice chilled. "Oh you don't, do you?" he said.

Josh maintained his position. "No," he said. "I mean, they were kind of weird looking, I guess, but the hippies were into peace and love. Isn't that what everyone's always telling us is important, peace and love? So," he concluded, a lawyer finishing his closing argument, "hippies don't sound all that bad, to me."

"I see," Grandpa said, his phrasing given a slight slur as he bit down on the stem of his pipe. "I take it you are an expert on the Hippie Wars."

The name was so ridiculous she almost burst out laughing. Josh managed to channel his amusement into a question. "The Hippie Wars?"

"Didn't think so," Grandpa said. "Happened back in 1968. Damned country was tearing itself apart. Group of hippies decided to leave civilization behind and live off the land, return to the nation's agrarian roots. Bunch of

college drop-outs, from New Jersey, New York City. Place they selected for this enterprise was a stretch of back woods belonged to a man named Josiah Sparks. He and his family had shared a fence with our people for nigh on fifty years. Good man, who didn't mind these strangers had settled themselves on his land without so much as a by-your-leave. 'Soil's poor,' he said. 'Snakes in the leaves, bear in the caves. If they can make a go of it, might be they can teach me something.' All through the spring and summer after they arrived, he left them to their own devices. But once fall started to pave the way for winter, Josiah began to speak about his guests. 'Kids'll never make a winter out there,' he said. Good, folks said, it'll send them back where they came from. Josiah, though—it was as if he wanted them to succeed. Not what you would've expected from a marine who'd survived the Chosin Reservoir. One especially cold day, Josiah decided it was past time he went up and introduced himself to his tenants, found out what assistance he could offer them.

"Turned out, they didn't need his help. Could be, they had in the weeks right after they'd arrived. In the time since, they'd figured out a crop they could tend that would keep them in money: marijuana. When Josiah went walking into their camp, that was what he found, row upon row of the plants, set amongst the trees to conceal them. He hadn't spoken two words to them before one fellow ran up from behind and brought a shovel down on Josiah's head. Killed him straight away. Hippies panicked, decided they had to get rid of his body. They had a couple of axes to hand, so they set to chopping Josiah to pieces. Once their butchery was finished, they dumped his remains into a metal barrel along with some kindling, doused the lot with gasoline, and dropped a match on it. Their plan was to mix the ashes in with their fertilizer and spread them over their plants. Anything the fire didn't take, they'd bury.

"Could be their scheme would've worked, but a couple of Josiah's nephews decided their uncle had been gone long enough and went searching for him. They arrived to what smelled like a pork roast. Hippies ambushed them, too, but one of the brothers saw the fellow coming and laid him out. After that, the rest of the camp went for them. They fought their way clear, but it cost an ear and a few fingers between them.

“By the time Josiah’s nephews returned with the rest of their menfolk and what friends they could muster, the camp had improved its armament to firearms, mostly pistols, a few shotguns. I figure they were supplied by whoever had partnered in their little enterprise. For the next week, your peace and love crew proved they could put a bullet in a man with the best of them. They favored sneak attacks—sent a handful of men to the hospital.

“So you’ll appreciate why I do not share your view of the hippie, and you’ll understand my views, unlike yours, are based in fact.”

Neither Rachel nor Josh questioned that their visit was over. She picked up her cane. As they stood to leave, however, Josh said, “Grandpa?”

“Hmm?”

“Weren’t you already living up here with Grandma in 1968?”

“I was.”

“Then how did you know about the Hippie Wars?”

Grandpa’s chair creaked as he leaned forward. “You think I’m telling stories?”

“No sir,” Josh said. “I was just wondering who told you.”

“My cousin, Samuel, called me.”

“Oh, okay, thank you,” Josh said. “Did you go to Kentucky to help them?”

Grandpa paused. “I did,” he said. His voice almost light, he added, “Brought those hippies a surprise.”

“What?” Josh said. “What was it?"

But their grandfather would say no more.

4. THE TAPE (2): DOWN THE WELL

“—the shore of a dried-up lake,” Grandpa was saying. “Looked like an old well, but if you’d dropped a bucket into it, you’d have come up empty. Ventilation shaft, though Jerry thought it might’ve helped light the place, too. He lowered me down, on account of he was a foot taller and a hundred pounds heavier than I was. Played football at Harvard, was strong as any of the roughnecks. The shaft sunk about fifty feet, then opened out. I switched on my light, and found myself dangling near the roof of a huge cavern. It

was another seventy-five feet to the floor, and I couldn't tell how far away the walls were. The rock looked volcanic, which set me to wondering if this wasn't an old volcano, or at least, a series of lava tubes."

"Was it?" Uncle Jim asked.

"Don't know," Grandpa said. "I was so concerned with what we found in that place, I never managed a proper geological survey of it. I'd stake money, though, that it was the remains of a small volcano."

"Okay," Jim said. "Can you talk about what you found there?"

"It was a city," Grandpa said, "or a sizable settlement, anyway. Maybe two-thirds of the cavern had collapsed, but you could see from what was left how the ceiling swept up to openings like the one I'd been lowered through, which gave the impression of enormous tents, rising to their tent poles. Huge pillars that joined ceiling to floor added to the sensation of being under a great, black tent. Iram had also been called the city of the tent poles, and standing there shining my light around it, I could see why."

"But how did you know it was a city, and not just a cave?"

"For one thing, the entrance I'd used. We took that as a pretty clear indication that someone had known about the place and used it for something. Could've been a garbage dump, though—right? We found proof. Around the perimeter of the cavern, smaller caves had been turned into dwelling-places. There were clay jars, metal pots, folded pieces of cloth that fell apart when we touched them. A few of the caves led to even smaller caves, like bedrooms. There was evidence of fires having been kept in all of them. Plus, most of the walls had been written on. I didn't know enough about such things to identify it, but Jerry said it resembled some of what he'd seen on digs down in Dhofar."

"You must have been pretty excited," Jim said. "I mean, this was a historic find."

"It was," Grandpa said, "but we weren't thinking about that. Well, maybe a little bit. May have been some talk about an endowed chair at Columbia for Jerry, a big promotion for me. Mostly, we were interested in the tunnels we saw leading out of the cavern."

5. FAMILY HISTORY

Officially, Grandpa had been retired from the oil company since shortly before Rachel's birth, when a series of shrewd investments had vaulted him several rungs up the economic ladder. His money had covered whatever portion of Rachel's appointments with a succession of retinal specialists her father's teacher's insurance did not, and he had paid for all of the specialized schooling and instruction she had required to navigate life with minimal vision. To Rachel's mother, in particular, her grandfather was a benefactor of whose largesse she was in constant need of reminding. To Rachel, he was a sharp voice which had retained most of the accent it had acquired growing up among the eastern Kentucky knobs, when a talent for math and science had allowed him to escape first to the university, then to the world beyond, working as a geologist for the American oil companies opening the oil fields of Saudi Arabia. The edge with which he spoke matched what he said, which consisted in almost equal parts of complaint and criticism—a rare compliment thrown in, as her father put it, to keep them on their toes.

According to Dad, his father had tended to the dour as far back as he could remember, but the tendency had been locked into place after Uncle Jim had run away from home at the end of his junior year in high school. Jim had been the brains of the brothers, a prodigy in math and science like his father before him. He tried not to show it, Dad said, but Grandpa favored his younger son, seemed genuinely excited by Jim, by his abilities, kept saying that, once Jim was old enough, there were things he was going to show him… When they realized that Jim had left home, and without a note or anything, the family was devastated. The police had conducted a lengthy investigation, which had included multiple interviews with each member of the family, but which had led nowhere. Grandma was heartbroken. Dad had no doubt the pain of Jim's departure lay at the root of the heart attack that killed her the following year. Grandpa was overtaken by bitterness, which his wife's death only deepened. Dad had already been away at college, and so had missed a lot of the day-to-day pain his parents had suffered, but for a long time, he said, he had been angry at his missing brother. Jim had given no hint of anything in his life so wrong as to require him abandoning it, and them, entirely. Later, especially after he'd met Mom, Dad's anger had

softened. Who knew what Jim had been going through? Still waters run deep and all that.

Jim's disappearance, combined with Grandma's death—not to mention, the blossoming of his stock portfolio—had set Grandpa on the path to retirement, a destination he had reached in the months before his first grandchild appeared. As far as Dad could tell, it had been years since the old man had been happy with his job. Every other week, it seemed, he was complaining about the idiots he worked with, their failure to recognize the need for bold action. Dad had never been much interested in his father's problems at work, and while Jim had been more (and genuinely) sympathetic, Grandpa had said that he couldn't explain it to his second son, he was too young. Dad supposed it was a wonder his father had stayed at his job as long as he had, but the pay was good, and he had responsibilities. After his principle obligation shrank from three members to one, however, he was free to play out the scenario he'd probably imagined a thousand times, and tender his resignation.

Grandpa's retirement had been an unusually active one. Several times a year, sometimes as often as once a month, he hired a car to take him and several large cases down to one of the metropolitan airports, JFK or LaGuardia or Newark, from which he boarded flights whose destinations were a survey of global geography: Argentina, China, Iceland, Morocco, Vietnam. Asked the purpose of his latest trip by either of his grandchildren, he would answer that he'd been called on to do a little consulting work, and if they were good while he was gone, he'd bring them back something nice. Any attempts at further questions were met by him shooing them out of whatever room they were in, telling them to go play. He was usually away for a week to ten days; although once, he was gone for a month, on a trip to Antarctica. While he was abroad, Rachel missed his presence in the house, but her missing him had more to do with her sense of a familiar element absent than any strong emotion. Neither her father nor her brother seemed much affected by his absence, and her mother was clearly relieved.

6. THE TAPE (3): THE TUNNELS

“—two kinds,” Grandpa was saying. “There were four tunnels leading out of the main chamber. Big enough for one, maybe two folks to walk along side-by-side. They led off to smaller caves, from which further tunnels branched to more caves. Jerry was for investigating these, trying to map out as much of the place as time would allow.”

“But you wanted to look at the other tunnels?” Uncle Jim said.

“There were two of them,” Grandpa said, “one next to the other. Each about half as tall as the first set: three and a half, four feet. Much wider: eight, maybe nine feet. More smoothly cut. The walls of the taller tunnels were rough, covered in tool marks. The walls of the shorter tunnels were polished, smooth as glass. To me, that made them all sorts of interesting. While Jerry sketched the layout of the main cavern, I got down on my hands and knees and checked the opening of the short tunnel on my right. Straight away, when I passed my light over it, I saw it was covered in writing. That brought Jerry running. The characters were like nothing either of us had seen before, and Jerry, in particular, had seen a lot. Had the tunnel’s surface not been so even, you might have mistaken the writing for the after-effect of a natural process, one of those times Mother Nature tries to fool you into believing there’s intent where there isn’t. The figures were composed of individual curved lines, each one like a comma, but slightly longer. These curves were put together in combinations that looked halfway between pictures and equations. We checked the tunnel on the left, and it was full of writing, too, the same script—though whatever it spelled out seemed to differ from tunnel to tunnel.

“Thing was,” Grandpa went on, “while the shorter tunnels had the appearance of more recent construction, they had the feel of being much older than their counterparts. Sounds strange, I guess, but you do enough of this work, you develop a sense for these things. To Jerry and me, it was obvious that some amount of time had passed between the carving of the two sets of tunnels, and whichever came first, we were sure a long time separated it from the second. What we had was a site that had been occupied by two different—two very different groups of people. We crept into each of the shorter tunnels about ten feet, and right away, felt the floor sloping downwards. The tunnel on the right veered off to the right; the tunnel on the left headed left. I think it was that that decided us on

exploring these tunnels, first. The taller tunnels appeared to be carved on approximately the same level. The shorter ones promised a whole new layer, maybe more. We flipped a coin, and decided to start with the one on the right.

"We didn't get very far. No more than fifty feet in, the tunnel had collapsed. If it had been our only option, we might have searched for a way around it. As it was, we had another tunnel to try, so we crawled out the way we'd come and entered the tunnel on the left.

"Our luck with this one was better. We followed the passage down and to the left for a good couple of hundred feet. Wasn't the most pleasant trip either of us had taken. The rock was hard on our hands and knees, and it had been a spell since we'd done much in the way of crawling. We had our lights, but they didn't seem that much in the face of the darkness before and behind us, the rock hanging above us. I'm not usually one for the jitters, but I was happy enough to see the end of the tunnel ahead. Jerry was, too.

"The room we emerged into was round, shaped like a giant cylinder. From one side to the other, it was easily a hundred feet. Dome ceiling, twenty feet overhead. Across from where we'd entered was another tunnel, same dimensions as the one that had brought us here. I was all for finding out where that led, but Jerry stopped to linger a moment. He wanted to have a look at the walls, at the carvings on them."

INTERLUDE: GRANDPA (2): COUSIN JULIUS AND THE CHAROLAIS

As a rule, Grandpa did not interfere with their parents' disciplining of them. Any decision with which he disagreed would be addressed via an incident from his own experience which he would narrate to Rachel and Josh the next time he had them upstairs. For Rachel, the most dramatic instance of this occurred when she was twelve. Seemingly overnight, a trio of neighborhood girls her age, previously friendly to her, decided that her lack of vision merited near-constant mockery. While she had been able to conceal the upset their teasing caused her from her parents, Josh had witnessed an instance of it in front of their house and immediately decided upon revenge. Rather than attacking the girls then and there, he had waited

a few days, until he could catch one of them on her own. He had leapt from the bushes in which he'd been concealed and swung his heavy bookbag at the side of her head. The girl had not seen him, which had allowed him to escape and attempt the same tactic with another of the girls the following day. After what had happened to her friend, though, this girl was prepared for Josh. She raised her shoulder to take the brunt of his swing, then pivoted into a punch that dropped him to the sidewalk. As black spots were dancing in front of his vision, the girl seized him by the hair and dragged him into her house, where she turned him over to her shocked mother. During the ensuing rounds of phone calls and parental meetings, the girls' cruelty to Rachel was acknowledged and reprimanded, but the heaviest punishment descended upon Josh, who was grounded for an entire month.

In the aftermath of this incident, the mixture of embarrassment, anger, and gratitude that suffused Rachel received a generous addition of anxiety the next afternoon, when Grandpa descended to the first floor to request her and Josh's presence in his sitting room. The two of them expected a continuation of the lectures they had been on the receiving end of for the last twenty-four hours—as, Rachel guessed, did their parents, who released them into their grandfather's care with grim satisfaction. Despite her belief that Josh hadn't done anything that bad—and that there was no reason at all for her to be involved in any of this—the prospect of a reprimand from Grandpa, who had a talent for finding the words that would wound most acutely, made her stomach hurt. If only she could leave Josh to face the old man himself—but her brother, stupid as he was, had acted on her behalf, and she owed him, however grudgingly, her solidarity. Swinging her cane side-to-side, she followed Josh up the stairs to the second floor and passed along the halls with their faint smell of bleach to Grandpa's sitting room and the smoky couch. She collapsed her cane and sat beside Josh. Maybe Grandpa would finish what he had to say and turn them loose quickly.

She recognized the tinkle of glass on glass that came from one of the six-packs of old-fashioned root beer that their grandfather sometimes shared with them. The pop and sigh of a cap twisting loose confirmed her intuition that he was going to sit in front of them and drink one of the sodas as he lectured. The second pop and sigh, and the third, confused her. Was he planning to consume all three of their root beers? The floor creaked, and

cold glass pressed against the fingertips of her right hand. She took the bottle, its treacly sweetness bubbling up to her nostrils, but did not lift it to her mouth, in case this was some sort of test.

Grandpa seated himself, and said, “The two of you are in a heap of trouble. It’s your parents’ right to raise you as they see fit, and there’s naught anyone can say or do about it. It’s how I was with my boys, and I won’t grant your dad any less with you. Joshua, they don’t take too kindly to you walloping this one girl and trying for the other, and Rachel, they’re tarring you with some of the same brush in case you had anything to do with putting your brother up to it. These days, folks tend to take a dim view of one youngster raising his hand against another. Especially if it’s a girl—your dad would say I’m wrong, times’ve changed, but rest assured: if those had been two boys you’d gone after, the tone of the recent discussions you’ve been involved in would have been different.

“I can’t intervene with your parents, but there’s nothing that says I can’t have a few words with you. So. When I was a tad older than the two of you, I went everywhere and did everything with my cousin, Julius Augustus. Some name, I know. It was the smartest thing about him. I expect your folks would call him ‘developmentally delayed’ or some such. We said he was slow. He was four years older, but he sat through ninth grade with me. It was his third time, after two tries at the grade before. He’d wanted to quit school and find a job, maybe on his uncle’s farm, but Julius’s dad fancied himself an educated man—which I guess you might have guessed from the names he loaded on his son—and he could not believe a child of his would not possess the same aptitude for learning as himself. Once I’d moved on to tenth grade and Julius had been invited to give ninth another try, his father relented, and allowed him to ask his uncle about that job.

“Julius’s dad, Roy, was my uncle by marriage. His family owned a farm a couple of miles up the road from where I lived. Had a big house set atop a knob, from which they looked down on the rest of us. They’d been fairly scandalized when Roy took a liking to Aunt Allison, who was my mom’s middle sister, but Roy had proved more stubborn than the rest of his family, and in the end, his father had granted Roy and Allison a piece of land which ran along one bank of the stream that swung around the foot of the hill. Julius Augustus was their only child who lived, and if folks judged it ironic

that a man of Roy's intellectual pretensions found himself with a boy who had trouble with the Sunday funnies, none of them denied the sweetness of Julius's temperament. You could say or do nigh-on anything to him, and the most it would provoke was a frown.

"It let him get along at his uncle's, which had been his grandfather's until the old man's heart had burst. The grandfather hadn't been what you'd call kind to his laborers, but he had been fair. His elder son, Roy's brother, Rick, was less consistent. Not long after his father's death, Rick had sunk a fair portion of the farm's money into a project he'd been talking up for years. He bought a small herd of French cattle—Charolais, the breed was called. He'd seen them while he was serving in France, in what we still called the Great War. Bigger cattle, heavier, more meat on them. Cream-colored. Rick had a notion that they would give him an advantage over the local competition, so he returned to France, found some animals he liked and a farmer willing to sell them, and arranged to have his white cattle shipped across the Atlantic. This was no easy task, not least because the Great Depression still had the country in its claws. More than a few palms wanted crossing with silver, and then a couple of the cows sickened and died on the journey. The Charolais that arrived took to the farm well enough, but Rick had imagined that, as soon as they were grazing his fields, everything was going to happen overnight, which, of course, it didn't. The great sea of white cattle he pictured needed time to establish itself. I guess some folks, including Roy, tried telling him this, but Rick would not, maybe could not, accept it. After another pair of the Charolais died their first summer, Rick decided it was because they hadn't been eating the best grass. Anyone could see that the grass all over the farm, and all around the farm, was pretty much the same. But Rick got it in his head that the grazing would make his herd prosper lay on the far side of the stream that snaked around the base of their family's hill—where Roy, Allison, and Julius had their home. Had he asked Roy to allow the cattle to feed on his land, his brother might've agreed. Rick demanded, though, said it was his right as elder son and heir to the farm to do what was best for it. Roy didn't argue his authority over what happened on the farm. But, he said, his property was his property, granted him fair and square by their father, and the first one of those white cows he caught on his side of the stream was going to get shot, as were any

subsequent trespassers. As you might expect, this did not go down so well with Rick.

"Despite the bad blood between his father and uncle, Julius was offered and accepted a job on the farm. Consisted mostly of helping with whatever labor needed done, from repairing a fence to painting the barn to baling hay. I suppose I found it unusual that Uncle Roy would permit his son to cross the stream to the farm, but there wasn't much else I could picture Julius doing, except digging coal, which was a prospect none of our parents was eager for us to explore. Anyway, Julius let me tell him how to spend what portion of his wages his parents allowed him to keep. Usually, this was on candy or soda pop; though sometimes, I'd promise him that, if he bought me a certain funnybook I especially wanted, I'd read to him from it. I would, too, at least until I was tired of explaining what all the big words meant. I reckon I wasn't always as kind to my big cousin as I should've been, and I reckon I knew it at the time, too. He was a great, strapping fellow, taller, stronger than me. Long as he was near, the boys who teased and occasionally pushed and tripped me kept their distance. Julius never let on that he didn't like spending time with me, so I didn't worry about the rest of it too much.

"Did I mention that Rick had a daughter? He had three of them, and a pair of sons, besides, but the one I'm speaking of was the second youngest, a girl name of Eileen. Plain, quiet. Don't know that anyone paid her much mind until her daddy showed up at Roy's house with her on one side of him and the Sheriff on the other. Eileen, Rick said, was going to have a baby. Julius, he also said, was the baby's father. I don't know what-all your folks have told you about such matters, but a man can force a baby on a woman. This was what Rick said Julius had done to his Eileen. Julius denied the accusation, but it was Eileen's word against his, and given he wasn't the sharpest knife in the drawer, her yes carried more weight than his no. The charge was a serious one, enough to have brought the Sheriff to the door; though you can be sure Rick's house on top of that knob helped guarantee his presence. The way the Sheriff told it, he already possessed sufficient evidence to put Julius under lock and key, at least until a trial. And, Rick chimed in, did his younger brother know what would happen to Julius once the other prisoners learned what he was awaiting trial for? Messing around

with a young girl—it would not go well for him. Julius might not reach his day in court, and that wasn't even mentioning the cost of hiring a lawyer to defend him…

"In a matter of ten, fifteen minutes, Rick and the Sheriff maneuvered Roy and Allison into believing that all they held dear was about to be taken from them. They were frantic. You can be sure Roy had some notion that there was more going on here than his brother was letting on, but he couldn't ignore the situation at hand, either. Rick let Roy and Allison sweat just long enough, then sprung his trap. Of course, he said, there might be another way out of this for all of them. He wasn't saying there was, mind you, only that there might be. Everyone knew that Julius wasn't equipped with the same faculties as those around him. There were places which would take care of such folk, ensure they would not be a danger to anyone else. In fact, there was a fine one outside of Harrodsburg, small, private, where Julius could expect to be well-looked-after. Wasn't cheap, no, though Rick supposed it was less than they might lay out for a decent lawyer, especially if the trial dragged out, or if Julius was convicted and they needed to appeal. Not to mention, it would avoid the talk about Julius that was sure to spread as a result of his imprisonment. Thing about that kind of talk was, it got folks riled up, thinking they needed to get together and take matters into their own hands. There wasn't much the Sheriff and his boys would be able to do if a mob of angry men marched up to the jail and demanded his prisoner, was there?

"By the end of an hour, Rick had everything he needed. To pay for the asylum to which their son was to be shipped in lieu of criminal charges and time in jail, Roy and Allison agreed to sign over their property to him. Within a couple of days, Julius's bags were packed and he was on his way to Harrodsburg. I saw him before he left, and he wasn't upset—mostly, he seemed confused by everything. Soon after he left, his parents went, too, to be closer to him. A school hired Roy as a janitor, and Allison took in washing.

"I saw Julius once, not long after he'd entered the asylum. Nice enough place, I guess, an old mansion that'd seen better days. But Julius was different. Among the conditions of his entering this place was that he not pose a danger to any of the women who worked or were patients there.

Shortly after he arrived, he was given an operation to prevent him forcing babies on anyone else. When I called on him, he hadn't fully healed. They'd dressed him in a white shirt and pants, to make him easy to track down in case he went to leave. There was a patch of damp blood down one leg of his trousers. He couldn't understand what had been done to him, and they had him on some kind of pain medicine that made things worse. He kept asking me to explain what had happened to him, and when I couldn't, tried to show me his wound to help. I don't imagine my visit made things any clearer for him.

"All the ride home, I kept thinking about those white cattle. Our family had talked about the situation. Wasn't anyone doubted it had been a way for Rick to get where he wanted to go. Question was, had the road presented itself to him, or had he paved it, himself? No one could credit the charge that had been brought against Julius. On the other hand, whatever his intelligence, his body was a man's, subject to all a man's urges. With only a boy's understanding to guide him, who could say what he might have done, had his blood been up? The women, in particular, would have liked a word with Eileen, but she was gone, sent off to a cousin in Memphis the day after her daddy had reached his agreement with her uncle.

"I knew. I knew that my cousin was innocent and that a terrible crime had been committed against him and his family. Sitting with him in the asylum had made me certain. For a brief time, I hoped the other members of my family might take action, avenge the wrong done Julius, but the furthest they would go was talking about it. One of my uncles proposed shooting Rick's special cattle, but the rest of the family rejected the plan. Rick would guess who'd done it right away, they said, and he'd already proved beyond any doubt he had the law snug in his pocket. God would take care of Rick in His time, my Aunt Sharon said. We had to be patient.

"While I didn't put much stock in Divine Justice overtaking Rick, I saw that my aunt was right about the necessity of waiting. Such a man as Rick couldn't help making enemies. He collected them the way a long-haired dog does ticks. The secret was to wait until he had gathered so many enemies as to move our name well down a list of potential suspects. This meant another six years, till I was halfway done with the university. Julius was dead—had died not many months after I'd seen him. The wound from his operation

had never closed properly. Infection set in, and though he fought it for a good long time, this was in the days before penicillin. I was at his funeral. Rick insisted he have a place in the family plot. As much as anything, what he intended as a magnanimous gesture settled me against him. If a man had done to your daughter what Rick had accused Julius of, there was no way you'd make room for him alongside the rest of your kin. Had he been your patsy, you might try to soothe any twinges of conscience by permitting him the privilege of a burial amongst the elect of your line. I swear to you, it was all I could do not to walk over to where Rick and his wife stood beside Roy and Allison and spit in his face. Not then, though, not then. Years had to pass, Julius's grave received a fancy headstone, the grass grew thick over it. Roy and Allison had to leave for a fresh start in Chicago, where the family lost touch with them.

"At last, the time came around. It was a rainy night, the tail end of a storm that had hung about for a couple of days. I wanted it raining so no one would think twice of my wearing a raincoat and hat, gloves and boots. There was a fellow at the university who owed me a considerable favor. He owned a car. I proposed to him that, should he drive me a couple of hours to a location with which I would provide him, wait there no more than an hour, and return me to campus, we would be square. He agreed. I had him take me to a crossroads a mile or so up the road from Rick's farm, where the stream that circled the bottom of his hill swerved close to the road. The stream was swollen with the rain, but not so much that I couldn't wade it to the spot where Roy and Allison's house had stood. Rick had torn it down, had a kind of lean-to built for his cattle to shelter under. This was where I found the lot of them, crowded in together. Their huge white bodies glowed in what little light there was. I dug around in my coat pocket, and came out with my buck knife. I didn't know if the cattle would spook, so I opened it slowly. The ones on the open side of the lean-to shifted their feet, but made no move to run. Speaking softly, smoothly, the kind of nonsense you coo to a baby, I approached. I put my free hand on the cow to my right, to steady her. Then I leaned behind and drew my knife across the backs of her knees. She didn't scream, just gave a little grunt as her hamstrings split and her back end collapsed. That knife was sharp as a smile. I doubt she felt much of anything. I did the same to her forelegs, and moved on to the cow in

front of her. Once I had the cattle on the open side done, and the way out of the lean-to blocked, I relaxed. The rest of Rick's Charolais put up no more resistance, though a couple called in protest. I was quick and I was thorough, and when I was done, I retraced my steps to the stream and walked it to where my friend sat waiting for me. The rain and the stream had washed most of the blood and mud from me. All the same, he kept his eyes fixed straight ahead. I told him we could go, and we did.

"You can be sure, I spent the next few days wondering what had been reported by the local press. It was all I could do not to rush out and buy them. Problem was, as a rule, I didn't pay much attention to newspapers; plus, I was in the middle of exams. I wasn't sure at what stage the investigation into what I'd done to Rick's cattle was. I didn't want to do anything, however trivial, that might cast suspicion on me, later. I didn't really need to read a reporter's account of what had taken place after I'd left. I could picture it well enough. Early the next morning, whoever Rick had put in charge of tending the cattle would've wandered over to check on them. He'd have discovered the herd under the lean-to, unable to move, blood watering the mud. He'd have run for Rick, who might've sent someone to fetch the veterinarian. The precise details weren't important. What was, was there was nothing could be done for the animals. To a one, they would have to be destroyed, the meat sold for whatever Rick could get for it. I couldn't decide if he'd have what it took to load the rifle and do what had to be done, himself, or if he'd direct a couple of his men to it. I preferred the former scenario, but either possibility would suffice, because whoever's finger was on the trigger, he'd hear the gunshots, each and every one of them.

"For a couple of months afterwards, I half-expected a visit from one lawman or another. Over the Christmas holidays, I kept a low profile. Rumor was, Rick's suspicion had lighted on a fellow out towards Springfield with whom he'd had a dispute about money the man claimed Rick owed him. Naturally, everyone in my family had an opinion as to who was responsible, but none of them so much as glanced in my direction. I was at the university; I was the last person who would commit such an act, and jeopardize his future. The exception was Aunt Sharon, who, as she

decreed that God's wrath had descended on His enemy, let her eyes fall on me long enough for me to know it.

"Obviously, what I did on behalf of Julius, I got away with. Even if I hadn't, though—even if the police had broken down my door and dragged me off to prison—it was the right thing to do. Family comes before everything. Someone wrongs one of yours, you do not let that go unanswered. You may have to bide your time, but you always redress an injury to your own. And when you do, you make certain it's in a way that will bring misery to whoever offended. That's what your blood demands of you.

"So anybody who stood up for his big sister to a trio of girls who deserve to have their lips sewn shut, I'd not only give him a bottle of pop, I'd hoist mine in salute to him."

Rachel followed her grandfather's direction and lifted her soda in Josh's direction. The time it had spent in her hand had taken the chill from it, but it was still sweet, and she drank it down eagerly.

7. THE FREEZER (2): OPENED

One time that Grandpa was away, he left the freezer unlocked. As they always did after he was safely gone from the house, Rachel and Josh descended the basement stairs; although she, for one, had done so without much enthusiasm, as if she were going through the motions of a ritual grown stale and meaningless. At least in part, that was due to her being seventeen, and more concerned with college applications and the senior prom than with a riddle whose solution never came any closer, and was probably not all that exciting, anyway. But Josh had insisted she come, the moodiness that had erupted with his fifteenth birthday temporarily calmed by the reappearance of their familiar game. He had been working on his lock-picking skills, he said—for reasons she did not wish to consider—and was eager to exercise them on the freezer's locks. Rachel couldn't remember the last time she'd spared any thought for the freezer, but the change in Josh was welcome and substantial enough for her to want to prolong it, so she had accompanied him.

As it turned out, her brother would have to find another test for his burgeoning criminal skills. For a moment, she thought the trickling she heard as she swept her cane from basement stair to basement stair was water running through the brass pipes concealed by the basement's ceiling tiles. Except no, there was none of the metallic echo that passage made. This was water chuckling into open air. At almost the same time, the smells mixing in the basement reached her. The typically faint odors of cinnamon and vanilla, with the barest trace of brine, flooded her nostrils, the cinnamon filling the end of her nose with its powdery fragrance, the vanilla pushing that aside with its almost oily sweetness, the brine suddenly higher in her nose. There was another smell, too, stale water. In comparison, the basement's usual odors of synthetic carpet, dust, and damp were hardly noticeable.

Josh's "Holy shit" was not a surprise; nor, really, were his next words: "It's open. Grandpa left the fucking thing wide open." The sound, the smells, had told her as much. She said, "He's defrosting it."

He was. He had pushed the freezer a couple of feet to the left, until the spigot that projected from its lower left side was hanging over the edge of the drywell. He unplugged and unlocked the freezer, turned the lever on the spigot, and who knew how many years' worth of ice was trickling down into the ground. Late-afternoon sunlight was warming the basement, but Josh flipped on the light. Rachel would have predicted her brother would run across to inspect the freezer, but he hesitated, and she swatted his leg with her cane. "Hey," she said.

"Sorry," he said.

"What?"

"This is kind of weird."

"No weirder than having the Goddamned thing here in the first place."

"Do you think he knows—you know?"

"That we've been fixated on it since we were kids?" she said. "Yeah, I'm pretty sure he's figured that one out by now."

"Could it be some kind of, I don't know, like a trap or something?"

"A trap? What the fuck are you talking about? This is Grandpa."

“Right,” Josh said, “it is. Are you telling me he’d pass up a chance to teach us a lesson, especially about minding our own business?”

“You’re being paranoid.” She shoved past him and made her way across the basement. Her cane clacked against the freezer. When her hand had closed on the edge of it, she said, “You want to come over here and tell me what’s in front of me?”

With the exasperated sigh that had become the trademark of his adolescence, he did. “Move over,” he said, pushing her with his hip. She shuffled to her left. Standing over the open freezer, she found the cinnamon-vanilla-brine combination strong enough to make her cough. “I know,” Josh said, “pretty intense, huh?”

“What do you see?”

“Ice, mostly. I mean, there’s a lot of ice in here, a shitload of it. I’d say that Grandpa had this thing about two-thirds full of ice.”

“Well, it is a freezer.”

“Ha-fucking-ha.”

“The question is, what has he been using it for?”

“Storage.”

“Obviously. Any sign of what, exactly, was being stored?”

“I—wait.”

She felt him lean forward, heard ice shifting. “What the fuck?” he breathed.

“What is it?”

“I don’t know. It’s like, paper or something.”

“Let me—” she held out her hand.

“Here.” He placed a piece of what might have been heavy tissue paper in her palm. She leaned her cane against the freezer and ran her other hand over the substance. Its texture was almost pebbled. It crinkled and bunched under her fingertips. Josh said, “It’s translucent—has a kind of greenish tint. At one edge, it’s brown—light brown.”

“It’s skin,” she said. “It could be from a plant, I guess, but I think it’s a piece of skin.” She brought it to her face. The cinnamon-vanilla-brine mix made her temples throb.

“Skin?” Josh said.

“Like from a snake,” she said, “or a lizard.”

“What the fuck?” Josh said.

Rachel had no answer.

8. THE TAPE (4): THE CARVINGS

“—ten disks,” Grandpa was saying, “evenly spaced around the room. Each was a good six feet or so across. They were hung low, only about a foot off the floor. I’m not one for art, but I reckon I could find my way around a museum. The style of these things wasn’t like anything I’d run across before. What was pictured tended more in the direction of abstract shapes—cylinders, spheres, cubes, blocks—than of specific details. The scenes had been carved in something like bas-relief, and incised with the same writing we’d found at the tunnel mouths. I couldn’t decide if it was vandalism, or part of the original design. The letters seemed too regular, too evenly placed to be graffiti, but I’m hardly the expert in such things.

“Jerry had brought his camera. He’d used up most of his film shooting the main cavern, but had enough left for the disks, so he photographed them.”

“What did they show?” Uncle Jim asked.

“Half of them, I couldn’t make heads nor tails of. Maybe if I’d had another few hours to study them, I might’ve been able to decipher them. The hands on our watches were moving on, though, and there was that other tunnel to consider.”

“How about the ones you could figure out?”

“There was a picture of a city,” Grandpa said, “although no such city as I’d ever seen, in or out of a book. Great buildings that curved to points, nary a straight line amongst them, like fangs of all different sizes. Another showed that same city—I’m pretty sure it was—destroyed, shattered by an enormous sphere crashing down into it. Third was of a long line of what I took for people, crossing a wide plane full of bones. There was one of another catastrophe, a large group of whoever this had been being trampled by a herd of animals—actually, this disk was a bit confusing, too. The animals were at the lead edge of a mass of triangular shapes that I took to

be waves, but whether the animals were supposed to represent a flood, or vice-versa, wasn't clear to me.

"The picture that was most interesting was the one set over the tunnel out of the room. At its center, there was a person—or, what was supposed to be a per-son—and, at all four points of the compass surrounding him, there was another, smaller person, maybe half his size. Seemed to me there was more writing on this disk than the others, concentrated between the fellow in the middle and his four satellites. Jerry said it might be a representation of their gods, or their ancestors, or their caste system—which was to say, just about anything."

"Did you explore the other tunnel?" Jim said. "Of course you did. Did you find anything?"

Grandpa laughed. "I guess you know your old man, don't you? Jerry would've been happy to return, said we'd already found plenty. We had, and I wasn't too sure of our lights, but by God did I want to find out what lay at the end of that other tunnel. Told Jerry I'd go myself, which I would've; though I was betting on him not wanting to be left alone. He didn't, but he made me promise we'd turn around the second our lights started to go.

"The tunnel out of the chamber was the exact copy of the one that brought us to it. For another couple hundred feet, it slanted down and to the left. The darkness wasn't any darker here than it had been at any point since we'd started our descent, but I found myself estimating how far below the surface we'd come, and that number seemed to make the blackness thicker.

"We issued into a room that was pretty much identical in size and shape to the one we'd left. Only difference was the tombs along the walls."

9. A FAMILIAR DEBATE

"Suppose everything Grandpa told Uncle Jim on that tape—suppose it's true."

"What?" Rachel said. Her bed shifted and complained as Josh lowered himself onto it. She closed the textbook her fingers had been trailing across. "Are you high again? Because if you are, I have the LSAT to prepare for."

“No,” Josh said, the pungent, leafy odor he’d brought with him a clear contradiction of his denial. “I mean, I might’ve had a little grass to chill me out, but this is serious. What if he was telling the truth?”

With a sigh, Rachel placed her book on the bed. “Do I have to do this? Are you really going to make me run through all the problems with what’s on that tape?”

“They were in the Empty Quarter,” Josh said, “the *Rub’ al Khali*. There’s all kinds of crazy shit’s supposed to be out there.”

“Actually,” she said, “that point, I can almost believe. Apparently, there are some famous caves not too far from where they were, so why couldn’t they have discovered another? And why couldn’t it have been inhabited? If there was a cave-in, and the desert came pouring through the ceiling, there’s your Atlantis of the sands legend.”

“So—”

“But. This would have been an archaeological find of historic significance. It would have made his friend Jerry’s career. He would have been famous, too. You don’t think two young guys wouldn’t have publicized the shit out of something like this?”

“Ah,” Josh said, “but you’re thinking in twenty-first-century terms. They couldn’t snap a picture with their phones and upload it to Facebook, while verifying their coordinates with their personal GPSes. They had to do things the old-fashioned way, which meant returning for additional photos and a survey of the location.”

“By which time,” she said, “there had been not one, but two week-long sandstorms, and the terrain had been entirely changed.”

“It’s the desert. There are sandstorms all the time.”

“I’m sure there are, which begs the question: How did they find a map to guide them there, in the first place?”

“Maybe it was a star map.”

“Then why couldn’t they find their way back?”

“Okay, so it was dumb luck they found the place. There’s still the pictures they did take.”

“Most of which,” she said, “were ruined by some kind of mysterious radiation they’re supposed to have encountered underground. What could be developed is—apparently—so generic it could be anyplace.”

Josh paused. “What about the egg?”

“Seriously?”

“Why not?”

“Why—because extraordinary claims require extraordinary proof.”

“There’s the freezer,” Josh said, “and its locks.”

“That’s hardly—”

“Remember the piece of skin we found in it?”

“You don’t think that was Grandpa fucking with us?”

“We hadn’t found Jim’s tape in the attic, then. What would have been the point?”

“I said: to fuck with us.”

“I don’t know,” Josh said.

“I do,” Rachel said. “Our grandfather is not keeping a pet monster in the freezer in the basement.”

“Not a monster,” Josh said, “a new species.”

“An intelligent dinosaur?”

“It’s not—that’s like calling us thinking monkeys. It’s what the dinosaurs developed into.”

“Again—and this is ignoring a ton of other problems with your scenario—what you’re describing would have been—I mean, can you imagine? A living example of another, completely different, rational creature? Grandpa and Jerry would have been beyond famous. Yet we’re supposed to believe Grandpa raised it, himself?”

“They wanted to study it. They thought it would be better for them to observe and document its development.”

“Which neither of them had any training for,” Rachel said. “And, once more, where’s the data they’re supposed to have accumulated?”

“Presumably, Jerry lost it, sometime before his heart attack.”

“How incredibly convenient, on both counts.”

“Anyway, from what I can figure, it isn’t as if the thing is all that smart.”

“Does it matter? You do not keep an earth-shaking scientific find on ice in the cellar of your house in upstate New York. Shit,” she added, “why are we even having this conversation?”

“It’s Uncle Jim,” Josh said.

“What about him?”

“I’ve been thinking about him running away—the timing of it. Near as I can tell, he and Grandpa sat down to record that tape about a month before Jim split.”

“And?”

“Well—do they sound like they aren’t getting along?”

“No,” Rachel said, “but that doesn’t mean anything. This could have been the calm before the storm.”

“Not according to Dad. The way he tells it, everything was fine between Uncle Jim and Grandpa and Grandma right until he left.”

“You have to take what Dad says about Uncle Jim with a chunk of salt. It’s safe to say he was a little jealous of his baby brother.”

“What I’m getting at,” Josh said, “is maybe Uncle Jim saw what was in the freezer. And maybe he didn’t like it. Maybe he freaked out.”

“So he ran away?”

“Could be. Could also be, he never left the house.”

“What—the thing ate him?”

“Maybe it was an accident,” Josh said. “He figured out how to unlock the freezer while Grandpa wasn’t there. Or Grandpa was there, but Jim got too close. Or—what about this?—Grandpa turned the thing loose on Jim because he was threatening to tell people about it, go public.”

“That’s pretty fucked-up,” Rachel said. “Grandpa’s an asshole who’s committed some acts that are, to put it mildly, of questionable morality, but that doesn’t mean he’d sic his pet monster on his child.”

“It would explain why Jim disappeared so completely, why he’s never been found.”

“As would a less elaborate—and less ridiculous—narrative. Not to mention, weren’t you sitting beside me during his family-comes-first lectures? Remember cousin Julius Augustus, the terrible things you do for your kin?”

“Family loyalty cuts both ways. If Jim set himself against the family, then he’d be liable for the consequences.”

“Seriously? Are you sure this paranoid fantasy isn’t about Grandpa and you?”

“Don’t laugh. You honestly believe that, if Grandpa thought I was harming the family, he wouldn’t take action?”

“‘Take action’: Will you listen to yourself? He’s an old man.”

“With a very powerful weapon at his command. You don’t need to be too strong to fire a gun.”

“Jesus—okay, this conversation is over. I have to get back to studying.” As Josh raised himself from the bed, Rachel added, “Occam’s razor, Josh: the simplest answer is generally the right one.”

“If I’m right about what’s in that freezer,” he said, “then this *is* the simplest answer.”

INTERLUDE: DAD AND MOM

Neither of Rachel’s parents cared to discuss her grandfather at any length. In her father’s case, this was the residue of an adolescence complicated by the loss of his brother and mother, and an adulthood spent in a career for which his father showed a bemused tolerance, at best. In her mother’s case, it was due to her father-in-law’s decades-long refusal to be won over by her efforts to achieve anything more than a tepid formality. Mom had been enough of a hippie in her youth for Rachel to have a sense of the root of Grandpa’s coldness to her; on a couple of occasions, however, she had hinted to Rachel that her uneasiness around her husband’s father had to do with more than his disdain for her lifestyle. There was something she thought she had seen—but it was probably all her imagination. Rachel

wasn’t to say anything to her grandfather, or he’d accuse Mom of having had a flashback, or worse, of having been tripping. Rachel tried to coax her mother into describing what she had seen, but she refused to be drawn.

10. THE TAPE (5): VISIONS OF THE LOST WORLD

“—eight sarcophagi,” Grandpa was saying. “That was what it looked like, at first. Huge stone boxes, ten feet long by four high by four deep. Cut from the same stone as the tunnels and the chambers. Six of them set around one side of the room, the remaining two opposite. It appeared the tombs had been turned over, because the front of each was open. Full of what we took for rocks, smooth, oblong stones the length of a man’s hand, all a speckled material I didn’t recognize. We circled the room, and it seemed every last one of the stones was cracked, most from end to end. I picked up one to inspect. Lighter than its size, almost delicate. Surface was tacky. I aimed my light into the crack, and saw it was hollow. I replaced it, and chose another one. It was empty, too, as were the others I checked. I moved onto the next stone box, and the one after that, and all the stones I examined were the same, fragile shells that stuck to my fingers. Not until I lifted a rock which hadn’t split all the way—and which was heavier than the others—and shone my light into it did the penny finally drop. These weren’t stones. They were eggs. The stone containers weren’t sarcophagi. They were incubators. This wasn’t a mausoleum. It was a nursery.”

“What?” Uncle Jim said. “What was in there? What did you see?”

“Broke the shell, myself,” Grandpa said. “Shouldn’t have, wasn’t anything like proper procedure, but what was inside that egg…”

“What?” Jim said. “What was it?”

“Conditions in the chamber had preserved the creature it contained well enough for me to make out the pattern on its skin. It was dried out, more like paper than flesh and bone. Guess you could say I found a mummy, after all. Curled up in the half-shell I was holding, it put me in mind of an alligator, or a crocodile. The body and tail did, anyway. Head was something else. For the size of the skull, the eye was huge, round, like what you find in some species of gecko. Its brow, snout, flowed together into a thick horn that jutted beyond the end of its lower jaw. Damnedest looking

thing, and when I studied its forelimbs more closely, I noticed the paws were closer to hands, the toes fingers."

"No way," Jim said.

"Boy, have you ever known me to lie to you?" A warning edge sharpened Grandpa's question.

"No sir," Jim said. "So what was it? Some kind of pet lizard?"

"Not by a long shot," Grandpa said. "I was holding in my palm the withered remains of one of the beings who had carved out the very room in which we were standing." During the pause that followed Grandpa's revelation, Rachel could feel her vanished uncle's distant desire to call her grandfather on his bullshit vibrating the silence; apparently, however, Uncle Jim had decided to water his valor with discretion. Grandpa went on, "Of course, I didn't know this at the time. I assumed the thing I'd found was another lizard, if a strange one. There were a couple more mummified creatures in amongst the eggs in this box, and something even more important: a single, unopened egg, its outside sticky with a coat of the gel that had been left on the others. I wrapped the unbroken egg with the utmost care, and placed it in the bottom of the rucksack I'd worn. Beside it, I packed the three dried-out creatures, along with a sampling of a half-dozen empty eggs. Wasn't anything else we could take as proof we'd been here, but I figured this was better than nothing.

"The trip back to the main cavern, then to the surface, then to the camp, was uneventful. Jerry and I talked about what we'd found, what it might portend for us. We agreed not to say anything to anyone until he'd developed the pictures he'd taken and we'd found someone we could trust to examine the things in my rucksack. Neither seemed as if it would take long—a week or two at the outside—and once we were in possession of evidence we could show someone, we didn't think we'd have any difficulty locating a sponsor who would reward us generously for leading a second, larger and better-equipped, expedition to Iram.

"What we didn't count on was the rolls of film Jerry had shot being almost completely ruined, most likely by some variety of radiation we encountered underground. The couple of photos you could distinguish in any detail showed cave structures that could've been anywhere. On top of that, within

twelve hours of our return, I developed a rash on my hands that raced up my arms to my chest and head, bringing with it a raging fever and a coma. Camp doctor'd never seen the like, said it was as if I'd had an allergic reaction to some kind of animal bite."

"The eggs," Jim said, "the stuff that was on them. Was it poisonous?"

"Delivery system," Grandpa said, "for a virus—several, each hitched to a cartload of information. Imagine if you could infect someone with knowledge, deliver whatever he needed to know directly to the brain. Was what was supposed to happen to the creatures when they hatched. On the way out of their eggs, they'd contract what learning they required to assume their role in their civilization. I assume the process was more benign than what I, the descendant of a different evolutionary branch, went through. Prior to this, had you asked me what I thought a coma was like, I would have predicted a deep sleep. It's what the word means, right? Not once did it occur to me such a sleep might be filled with dreams—nightmares. Now, I understand what I saw while unconscious as my brain's effort to reckon with the foreign data being inserted into it. At the time, I felt as if I was losing my mind. Even after I came out of the coma, it was weeks till I could manage a day without some pretty strong medicine, or a night in anything close to peace."

"What did you see?" Jim said.

"Lot of it was in fragments," Grandpa said, "whether because the viruses had decayed over time, or my brain chemistry was too different, I'm not sure. Maybe both. I saw a city standing on the shore of a long, low sea. Made up of tall, triangular structures that curved to one side or another, like the teeth of a vast, buried beast. Their surfaces were ridged, like the bark of a plane tree, and I understood this was because they hadn't been built so much as grown. They were of a piece with the forest that surrounded the place. Herds of what looked like a cross between a bird and a lizard, their feet armed with a single, outsized claw, patrolled the forest lanes, chasing off the larger animals that wandered into them from time to time. These bird-lizards had been grown much the same way as the city, what was already there shaped to the ends of the place's inhabitants. That was what the creatures had raised it did, took what the world around them gave and altered it to fit their purposes. They'd done so for an unimaginable length of

years, while the stars rearranged into dozens of sets of constellations. They did it to themselves, steering their biology down certain paths, until they'd split into four…you might call them castes, I suppose. They were distinct enough from one another to be almost separate species. Soldier class was at the bottom; next came the farmers, then the scientists, and finally the leaders. They'd fixed it so they developed from infant to adult in about three years.

"Some kind of disaster brought the whole thing tumbling down. I couldn't tell exactly what. I glimpsed a wall of fire reaching all the way to the sky, but that was it. There weren't many of the creatures to begin with. Their civilization had been in decline for tens of thousands of years, pulling back to the location I'd seen, the original city. Had it not been for some of them working underground, the things would've been burned away entirely. As it was, there were only a few thousand survivors, left with a landscape that had been char-coaled, bunched up like a blanket. Overhead, the sky was black clouds. A few of the creatures proposed throwing in the towel, joining their brethren in oblivion, but they were outvoted by the rest of the survivors, who decided to search for a new spot to call home. Dissenters didn't have much choice in the matter: their leaders had the ability to force their actions with their minds. So the lot of them left on a journey which would consume decades. Everywhere they went, things were the same, the earth and pretty much everything that had lived on it seared to ash. Once, they came to an ocean, and it was choked with carcasses out to the horizon. The air chilled. Clouds churned above, spilling dirty snow by the foot. Half the creatures died over the course of their travels. In the end, the leaders decided their best hope was hibernation. There were places—the sites of cities long-abandoned—where they could find sufficient facilities left to put themselves into a long, deep sleep, from which they might awaken when the planet had recovered itself. They found one such location in the far south, on the other side of what would be called Antarctica. As best they could, they secured the site, and settled down to sleep.

"And sleep they did, for fifty thousand, a hundred thousand years at a stretch. The world's wounds scarred over. New plants and trees appeared, spread across the land, were joined by new and strange animals. The creatures had lived during the great age of the dinosaurs—were its

crowning achievement. They'd witnessed families of beasts like small mountains ambling across the grasslands; they'd fought feathered monsters with teeth like knives in the forests. Now, when they sent scouts to inspect their surroundings, they heard tales of smaller animals, covered in hair. As they woke from rests that lasted millennia, those animals grew larger, until it was as if the wildlife they'd known in their former existence was being recast in other flesh. Nor was the rise of these beasts the only change in their environment. The continents were shifting, sliding towards the positions we know. Antarctica was cooling, ice and snow spreading across it. Never ones to act in haste when they didn't have to, the creatures chose to wait. Eventually, they did abandon that location. I can't say when, or why.

"The rest was even more fractured. They left Antarctica in search of a spot closer to the equator. That might have been what we called Iram, or it might have been another spot before it. For a little while, they did all right. Population increased, to the point a group set out west, to find another of the old sites. The two settlements kept up contact with one another. After more time than you or I could comprehend, it appeared the creatures might be on the rebound.

"There was one problem for them, one fly doing the backstroke in the ointment: us, humans. They'd been aware of us as we'd risen from four legs to two and started our long climb up the evolutionary staircase, but it was only as another instance of the weird fauna that had overtaken the world. In what must have seemed the blink of an eye, we were on our way to becoming the dominant life-form on the planet. To make matters worse, we were hostile to them from the get-go, aggressively so. If a human encountered one of them, he fled screaming in the other direction. If a group of humans ran into one of them, they would do their level best to kill it. The creatures had the advantage in terms of firepower. Each of their soldiers had been crafted to be all the weapon it would need against foes much worse than a handful of hairless apes. We had the advantage in terms of numbers—not to mention, we had an ability to make leaps in our reasoning that was completely alien to them. We could surprise the creatures in ways they couldn't us. So began a war which spanned a good deal of man's prehistory. By and large, it was fought by small groups from

either side, sometimes individual warriors. There was a point when the creatures who'd settled in the west came out in force against the human kingdom that had arisen near them. Fought all the way into its capital city, to have it swept by a mighty wave that drowned both sides alike. Creatures never recovered from that. They ceded more and more of what territory they'd held to humans. In the end, they opted for the only route left open them: another long sleep. As they had before, they fortified their retreat as best they could, and let slumber take them."

There was a moment's pause, Uncle Jim allowing his father to pick up the thread of his narrative. When it was clear that was not about to happen, Jim said, "Then what?"

"That was it," Grandpa said. "Wasn't anything else. Believe you me, what had been stuffed between my ears was more than enough. You know how full your brain feels after you've pulled an all-nighter prepping for a big test? This was like all the cramming you'd ever done for every test you've ever taken, present at the same time. After I'd climbed out of the coma, the doctor and nurses thought I was delirious. Wasn't that. It was a library's worth of new information trying to squeeze itself into my neurons. Gradually, over a span of weeks, I came to terms with the knowledge I'd gained. By the time I was walking out of that room, though, there was more for me to reckon with. For one thing, after sweating whether anyone would blame him for the sickness that had overwhelmed me, Jerry had gone off in search of Iram, alone. But the entire region had been swept by sandstorms that had reconfigured the landscape beyond his ability to accommodate. For another thing, our team had been moved to a new site, fifty miles east of where we'd been. Fortunately, Jerry had kept my rucksack close and unopened. Absent his photographs and unable to retrace the path to Iram, he doubted anyone would credit him with finding anything but a cache of lizard eggs.

"They were more than that—much, much more. I'd an idea we might locate a scientist to show the eggs to. Wasn't sure if we'd be better with a paleontologist, or a zoologist. I also figured a biochemist might be interested in the substance that had coated the eggs, what it contained. Hadn't paid much mind to the single unhatched egg I'd found; guess I

assumed its contents would be useful for purposes of comparison. I certainly was not expecting it to hatch."

11. THANKSGIVING

Thanksgiving was the kitchen summer-hot, humid with dishes simmering and steaming on the stove. It was the tomato-smell of the ketchup and soy-sauce glaze her mother had applied to the turkey in the oven; the rough skins of the potatoes Mom had set at one end of the table for Rachel to peel, a tradition that reached back seventeen years, to when her seven-year-old self had insisted on being involved in the preparation of the meal, and her mother had sat her down with a peeler and a handful of potatoes and allowed her to feel her way through removing the tubers' skins. Mom usually bought potatoes whose surfaces were covered in ridges and bumps, and there had been moments Rachel fancied she could almost pick out letters and parts of words encoded on them. She had advanced well beyond those first four potatoes; now, she was responsible for peeling and chopping all the necessary vegetables. For a brief time in his late teens, Josh had insisted on helping her; mostly, she had thought, to improve his standing with their parents. The last few years, he had abandoned the kitchen in favor of the living room, where their father and grandfather passed the hours prior to dinner watching whatever football games were on the television. Dad wasn't a big football fan, not in the same way as Grandpa, who took an almost visceral delight in the players' collisions. But he had grown up with his father's passion for the sport, and had learned enough about it to discuss the plays on-screen with the old man. It wasn't something they did that often—the Super Bowl was the only other instance she could think of—but it seemed to fulfill a need both men felt to demonstrate their bond as father and son. Rachel hadn't been surprised when Josh, despite his almost complete ignorance of anything sports-related, had wanted to join their fraternity. She judged it a demonstration of the event's ongoing importance to him that he had raised himself from the bed into which he'd collapsed at who-knew-when this morning, and, still reeking of stale cigarette smoke and watery beer, shuffled in to join them, stopping in the kitchen long enough to pour himself a glass of orange juice.

Their father had greeted him with typical irony—“Hail! The conquering hero graces us with his presence!”—their grandfather with his typical grunt.

Afterwards, Rachel would think that she hadn’t been expecting any trouble, today. Then she would correct herself, as she realized that she had been anticipating a disruption of the holiday, and had tied it to Josh. What she had been prepared for was her brother disappearing for ten minutes right as they were about to sit down to eat, and returning reeking of pot. Mom would say, “Josh,” the tone of her voice a reproach not so much of the act—she and Dad had done (and continued to do, Rachel thought) their share of grass—as of his total lack of discretion. Grandpa wouldn’t say anything, but his end of the table would practically crackle with barely suppressed rage. Dad would hurry to ask Rachel, who would be attempting to recall a sufficiently lengthy and distracting anecdote, how Albany Law was going. Scenarios approximating this one had played out over the last several Thanksgiving and Christmas dinners, since Josh had discovered the joys of mood- and mind-altering substances. To the best of her knowledge, his proclivities hadn’t interfered with his studies as an undergraduate or graduate student, which Rachel guessed was the reason their parents hadn’t come down on him with more force than they had. But it angered Grandpa to no end, which, Rachel increasingly believed, constituted a good part of the reason her brother did it.

But the argument that erupted this day: no way she could have predicted it. It began with something her grandfather said to her father, something that registered as background noise because she was answering her mother’s question about where she was planning on going after she passed the bar. Clear as a bell, Josh’s voice rang out: “Hey, Grandpa, why don’t you give Dad a break, okay?”

“Josh!” their father said.

“All I’m saying is, he should take it easy on you,” Josh said.

“That’s enough,” Dad said. “We’re watching the game.”

“That were my boy,” Grandpa said, “he’d speak to his elders with a bit more respect.”

“Dad,” their father said.

“That were my son,” Josh said, “I wouldn’t treat him like a piece of shit all the time, especially after what I did to his brother.”

“Josh!” Dad said. “What the hell is wrong with you?”

Grandpa said nothing.

“I’m fine,” Josh said. “Not like poor Uncle Jim. Right, Grandpa?”

“What the hell are you going on about?” Dad said. “Are you high?”

“No I am not,” Josh said. “If I were, it wouldn’t have any bearing on what we’re talking about, would it, Grandpa?”

“Stop it,” Dad said. “I don’t know what you’re talking about, but give it a rest, okay?”

“What I can’t work out,” Josh said, “is whether it was an accident, or deliberate. Did things slip out of control, or did you turn that thing on your son? And if you did loose it on him, what can he possibly have done to drive you to do so? Oh, and one more thing: How can you stand yourself?”

“Leave,” Dad said. “Just leave. Get out of here.”

“Boy,” Grandpa said, “you’ve gone beyond the thin ice to the open water.”

“Which means what? That I can expect a visit from your friend in the freezer?”

“Josh,” Dad said, his easy-chair creaking as he sat forward in it, “I’m not kidding. You need to leave.”

“All right,” Josh said, “I’ll go. If there’s anything you want to show me, Grandpa, you know where to find me.” The couch springs groaned as he stood. Rachel half-expected him to pause in the kitchen on his way to his room, or for her mother to call his name, but neither happened. When his footsteps had finished their tromp along the hall, their father said, “Dad, I am so sorry for that. I don’t know what got into him. Are you all right?”

“Game’s on,” Grandpa said.

12. THE SECOND TAPE

The second tape had been damaged, to the extent that the portion of Uncle Jim’s conversation with Grandpa it recorded had been reduced to a stream of garble to whose surface select words and phrases bobbed up. The

majority of them (“room,” “go,” “space”) were sufficiently generic to be of little aid in inferring the contents of Grandpa’s speech; although a few (“scared,” “raw meat,” “soldier”) seemed to point in a more specific direction. From the first listen, Josh insisted that their Grandfather had been describing how the creature which crawled out of the egg had been frightened, until he had fed it the uncooked flesh of some animal or another, probably winning its trust. Later on, Grandpa had identified the creature as belonging to the soldier class he’d learned about during his coma. While she conceded that Josh’s interpretation was reasonable, Rachel refused to commit to it, which Josh claimed was just her being a pain in the ass. Given what they’d already listened to, what better construction did she have to offer?

None, she was forced to admit, nor did the three longer passages they found on the tape provide any help. The first came five minutes in; the babble unsnarled and Grandpa was saying, “—like when you come down with the flu. High temperature, head swimming, every square inch of skin like a mob of angry men beat it with sticks. Maybe it would have had the same effect on the creatures, but I doubt it. Has to do with the difference in biology, is my guess. Doesn’t help that the thing fights you. Especially if there’s blood in the air, it’s like trying to wrestle a strong man to the ground and keep him there. Sometimes, there’s no choice but to let it go, a little bit. Why I use the freezer. Long as it’s in there, it’s dormant. After you take it out, if you’re careful and don’t overdo things, there’s no problem keeping it under control almost the entire time. I—” and his words ran together.

Twenty-four minutes after that passage, long after they had given up hope of encountering another and left the tape playing so they could tell themselves they had listened to all of it, the garble gave way to Grandpa saying, “After that, I received a visit from a couple of fellows whose matching crew cuts, sunglasses, and black suits were as much ID as what they flashed in their wallets. I’d caught sight of such characters before. Every now and again, they would show up at the camp, ask to speak to one of the experts about something. Wasn’t too strange, when you thought about it. Here we were, working in a foreign land, where we might notice a detail about the place or people that would be useful for these boys. Cold War was in full swing, and the lessons of the last big one were fresh in everyone’s

mind, especially the strategic advantage of a plentiful supply of fuel. Our work was tied up with national security, so it wasn't a surprise that the fellows who concerned themse lves with it should keep an eye on us. Tell the truth, I was curious to find out what they'd driven all this way to ask me about. Naïve as it sounds, not once did it cross my mind that they might be here to inquire about my other activities. Not that the company would have had any remorse over what they'd had me do to the competition: I just assumed they wouldn't want me revealing such a valuable secret. Never did learn if someone had blabbed, or if the G-men had sweated it out of them. No matter. These boys cut straight to the point. Said they knew I'd been up to some extracurricular activities, and were going to provide me the opportunity to put those activities to work for my country. Which was to say —" a paraphrase that was swallowed in a mess of sound.

Before the third and final section, the tape spat out the phrase, "children of the fang." Three minutes after that, at the very end of the second side of the second tape, the nonsense came to an end and was replaced by silence. As Rachel was running her finger across the tape recorder's buttons, Grandpa's voice said, "What we never could work out was whether the viruses floating around my blood had changed me permanently. Could I pass along my control of the creature to my child, or was it confined to me? How could we know, right? I hadn't met your ma, hadn't settled down and started a family, yet."

Uncle Jim said, "What do you think, now?"

"I think we might find out," Grandpa said, and the tape recorder snapped off.

INTERLUDE: GRANDPA (3): KNIFE WANTS TO CUT

Whether birthday, Christmas, or other celebration such as graduation, the gift Rachel or her brother could expect from Grandpa was predictable: money, a generous amount of it tucked into a card whose saccharine sentimentality it was difficult to credit their grandfather sharing. When they were younger, the bills that slid out of their cards from Grandpa had been a source of puzzlement and occasional frustration to her and Josh. Why couldn't their grandfather have given them whatever present they'd

requested of him, instead of money? In a relatively short time, their complaints were replaced by gratitude, as Grandpa's beneficence enabled Rachel and Josh to afford extravagances their parents had refused them.

The exception to this practice occurred on Josh's thirteenth birthday. After he had unwrapped his gifts from his parents and Rachel, but before he had moved on to their cards, Grandpa said, "Here." A box scratched across the table's surface.

"Grandpa?" Josh said. Whatever was inside the box thwacked against its side as Josh picked it up. Something heavy, Rachel thought, probably metal. A watch? "Buck knife," Josh read. "Really?"

"Open it and find out," Grandpa said.

Rachel could feel the look her father and mother exchanged.

The cardboard made a popping sound as Josh tore into it. "Coooooooooool," he said. Plastic crinkled against his fingers.

Their father said, "Dad."

Grandpa said, "Boy your age should have a knife—a good one."

The blade snicked as Josh unfolded it into place. "Whoa," he said.

Their father said, "Josh."

Grandpa said, "It's not a toy. It's a tool. A tool's only as good as your control of it, you understand? Your control slips—you get sloppy—and you'll slice your skin wide open. Someone's next to you, you'll slice them open. That is not something you want. Knife wants to cut: it's what it's made for. You keep that in mind every time you reach for it, and you'll be fine."

Their mother said, "Josh, what do you say?"

"Thank you, Grandpa," Josh said, "thank you thank you thank you!"

Within a week, the knife would be gone, confiscated by Josh's homeroom teacher when she caught him showing it off to his friends. After a lengthy conference with Mrs. Kleinbaum, their father retrieved the knife, which he insisted on holding onto until the school year was out, his penalty for Josh's error in judgment. By the time summer arrived, Josh had pretty much

forgotten about his grandfather's present, and if he remembered to mention it to their father, it was not in Rachel's hearing.

Before all of this, though, Josh let her hold the gift. The knife was heavy, dense in the way that metal was. Longer than her palm, the handle was smooth on either end, slightly rougher between. "That's where the wood panels are," Josh said. On one side of the handle, a dip near one of the ends exposed the top edge of the blade. By digging her nail into a groove in it, she could lever the blade out. As it clicked into place, a tremor ran up the handle. Rachel slid her finger along the knife's dull spine. About a third of the way from its end, the metal angled down to the tip. "Like a scimitar," Josh said. She dimpled her skin on the point. "Careful," Josh said.

"Shut up," she said, "I am being careful." Ready to part her flesh, the blade's edge passed under her touch. In her best approximation of Grandpa's voice, she said, "Knife wants to cut." She folded the knife closed, and handed it back to Josh.

He laughed. "Knife wants to cut," he said.

13. IN THE BASEMENT (NOW): THE THING IN THE ICE

Because of Grandpa's stroke Christmas Eve, neither Rachel nor her parents paid much attention to what they assumed at the time was Josh's refusal to appear for Christmas. Granted, it had been a few years since he'd last missed a family holiday, but he had spent most of his Thanksgiving visit complaining about the workload required by his doctoral classes (the stress of which their parents had diagnosed as the cause of his blowup with Grandpa). He had a trio of long papers due immediately before Christmas break—not the most work he'd ever faced, but on a couple of occasions on the day before Thanksgiving, he'd alluded to Rachel about a mid-semester affair with a guy from Maine that had crashed and burned in spectacular fashion, leaving him dramatically behind in all his classes. She had offered his backlog of assignments to her mother as the reason for his abrupt departure Saturday afternoon, while Rachel and her parents were braving the crowds at the Wiltwyck mall. His assignments were probably the reason that none of them had heard from Josh the last few weeks, either.

And if she and her parents were to be honest with one another, it was likely as well that Josh had opted to give Christmas a pass. After Mom heard the thump and crash on the front stairs and went to investigate, and found Grandpa sprawled halfway down, his breathing labored, the left side of his face slack, his left arm and leg so much dead lumber, the focus had shifted from holiday preparations (which included planning for a possible Round Two between Josh and Grandpa) to whether the old man would survive the next twenty-four hours. Even after the doctors had pronounced Grandpa's condition stable, and expressed a cautious optimism that subsequent days would bear out, he remained the center of attention, as Rachel and her parents talked through what needed doing at home to accommodate his changed condition, and set about making the necessary calls to arrange the place for him. She left a couple of messages on Josh's phone, the first telling him to call her, the second, a few days later, informing him of Grandpa's stroke, and though she was annoyed at his failure to respond, especially once he knew the situation, she didn't miss the inevitable torrent of self-reproach with which he would have greeted the news—and which certainly would have been worse had he been there with them.

By Valentine's Day, what Rachel referred to as her brother's radio-silence had become a source of worry for their mother. "Do you think he's still upset about Thanksgiving?" she asked during one of their daily calls. Rachel could not believe that Josh would sulk for this long; although there had been a couple of occasions during his undergraduate years when a particularly intense relationship had caused him to drop off the face of the earth for a couple of months. She phoned his cell, but her, "It's me. Listen: Mom's worried. Call her, okay?" betrayed more pique than she intended. But she could not credit the edge to her voice for Josh's continuing failure to phone their mother. And, despite his assurances that Josh was probably caught up in some project or another, Dad's voice when she spoke with him revealed his own anxiety. Only Grandpa, his speech slowed and distorted by the stroke, seemed untroubled by Josh's silence. Both her parents were desperate to drive up to Josh's apartment, but feared that appearing unannounced would aggravate whatever the situation with him was. Rachel bowed to their none-too-subtle hints, and offered to do so for them.

Before she could take a taxi to the other side of the city, however, one of Josh's fellow students at SUNY Albany called her to ask if everything was okay with her brother, whom, he said, he hadn't seen since he'd left for Thanksgiving vacation the previous semester. He'd left messages on Josh's cell, but had heard nothing in reply. He'd remembered Josh mentioning a sister at Albany Law, so he'd looked up her number, which he'd been meaning to call for a while, now. He didn't want to be intrusive. He just wanted to be sure Josh was okay and knew his friends were asking for him. That conversation was the first of a chain that led to several of Josh's other friends, then their parents, then the police. By the end of the day, her mother had left her father to watch Grandpa and raced up the thruway to pick up Rachel and drive to Josh's apartment, where they were met by Detective Calasso of the Albany PD and a pair of uniform officers. Both Rachel and her mother had keys to the door. Her heart was beating so fast it was painful, not because of what she was afraid they were going to find, but because of what she was certain they were not. The moment the door swung in, the smell that rolled out, dry, cool dust, confirmed her suspicion. During their search of Josh's small living quarters, the detective and his colleagues discovered two bags of pot, a smaller one in the top drawer of the bedroom dresser, and a larger one sunk inside the toilet's cistern. Once they'd found the second bag, the tenor of the detective's questions underwent a distinct change, as Josh went from graduate student in philosophy to small-time drug-dealer. Rachel could hear the narrative Calasso's line of inquiry was assembling, one in which her brother's criminal activities had brought him into jeopardy from a client, competitor, or supplier. Best case, Josh had gone into hiding; worst, he'd never had the chance. From the detective's perspective, she could understand: it was an attractive explanation that had the virtue of neatly accounting for all the evidence confronting him. Her and her mother's protests that this wasn't Josh were to be expected. How often, in such situations, could family members admit that their loved ones were so markedly different from what they'd known? Detective Calasso assured them that the police would do everything in their power to locate Josh, but by the time her mother was dropping her back at her apartment, she was reasonably sure that the detective deemed the case essentially solved.

That she would entertain Josh's claims about Grandpa and what he had locked away in his basement freezer was at first an index of her frustration after four weeks of regular calls to Detective Calasso, during which he never failed to insist that he and his men were working tirelessly to ascertain her brother's whereabouts. Approximately every third conversation, he would inform Rachel that they were pursuing a number of promising leads, but when she asked him what those leads were, he appealed to the sensitivity of the information. She hardly required a lifetime spent mastering the nuances of spoken expression to recognize that he was bullshitting her. She could believe that Calasso had queried what criminal informants he knew for information on her brother, as she could that his failure to turn up anything substantive would have done little to change his theory of the case. Compared to the plot in which her brother had been assassinated by a rival drug dealer and his weighted corpse dumped in the Hudson, the prospect that the accusations he'd lobbed at their grandfather at Thanksgiving had prompted the old man to some terrible act had the benefit of familiarity.

In the space of a week, however, the Grandpa's-monster-theory, as she christened it, went from absurd to slightly less than absurd, which, while not a huge change, was testament to the amount of time she'd spent turning it over in her mind, playing devil's advocate with herself, arguing Josh's position for him. Her dismissal of the story Grandpa had told Uncle Jim was based on her assumption that he and his friend, Jerry, would have been sufficiently competent to take full advantage of the opportunities with which their supposed discoveries presented them. What if they hadn't been? What if they hadn't known how to exploit their findings? After all, why should they have? Especially if they couldn't trace their way back to the place? And say, for the sake of argument, that Grandpa had come into the care of…something, something fantastic. Who was to say he would have turned it over to a zoo, or university? It wouldn't have been the most sensible course of action, but, as her favorite professor did not tire of reminding her, logical, self-consistent behavior was the province of bad fiction. Actual people tended to move in ways which, while in keeping with the peculiarities of their psychology, resembled more the sudden shifts in course typical of the soap opera.

Which meant, of course, that her younger brother could have had a secret life as a drug dealer. And that their grandfather could have been keeping an unimaginable creature in enforced hibernation in the basement. The impossibility of what she was considering did not stop her from making a couple of discrete inquiries among her closer friends as to the possibility of acquiring a set of lock picks and being instructed in their use. This proved remarkably easy. One of those friends had a friend who earned extra cash as a stage magician whose skill set included a facility with opening locks. For the price of a couple of dinners, the magician was happy to procure for Rachel her own set of tools and to teach her how to employ them. She wasn't certain if she was one hundred percent serious about what she appeared to be planning, or if it was a temporary obsession that had to work itself out. The entirety of the bus ride to Wiltwyck, she told herself that she was not yet positive she would descend to the basement. That her parents were away for the afternoon and Grandpa still of limited mobility meant no more than it meant. She managed to keep that train of thought running for the taxi ride from the bus station to her parents' house. But once she had let herself in the front door, hung up her coat, and slid the soft bag with the lock picks in it from her pocketbook, it seemed pointless to continue pretending there was any doubt of her intentions. She listened for Grandpa, his home health aide, and when she was satisfied there was no one else on the first floor, set off sweeping her cane from side to side down the front hall, towards the basement door.

In no time at all, she was resting the cane against the freezer. How many times had she been here, sliding her hands along the appliance's edge until they encountered each of Grandpa's locks? Always with Josh maintaining a steady stream of chatter beside her. Now, the only sound was the low hiss of her palms over the freezer's surface, the click of metal on metal as she found a lock and tilted it up. How long ago had Grandpa switched entirely to padlocks? It made what she was about to do easier. She placed the lockpick bag on top of the freezer, rolled it open, selected her tools, and set to work.

The locks unclasped so easily, it was almost anticlimactic. Half-anticipating an additional security measure she'd missed, Rachel searched the freezer lid. Nothing. She put the opened locks on the floor, returned her

tools to their bag and put it beside the locks, and braced her hands against the lid. After all these years, to be… There was no point delaying. She pushed upwards, and with the pop of its rubber seal parting, the lid released.

A cloud of cinnamon, vanilla, and brine enveloped her. She choked, coughed, stepped away from the freezer. Her eyes were streaming, her nose and tongue numb. She bent forward, unable to control the coughs that shook her lungs. So much for secrecy: if Grandpa had been unaware of her presence in the house previously, she'd just advertised it. Still coughing, she returned to the freezer and plunged her hands into it.

Ice cubes heaped almost to its top rattled as her fingers parted their frozen geometry. She moved her hands back and forth, ice chattering and rattling. There was a click, and the freezer's motor whirred to life. When had Grandpa loaded all this ice in here? Funny to think that not once had she and Josh asked that question.

Her fingertips brushed something that wasn't ice. She gasped, overcome with sudden terror that she had found her brother, that Grandpa had flipped out, murdered him, and used the freezer to hide the body. Even as her heart leapt in her chest, her not-completely-numb fingers were telling her that this wasn't Josh. It was an arm, but it was shorter than her brother's, the skin weird, pebbled. She followed it to one end, and found a hand with three thick fingers and a thumb set back towards the wrist. A claw sharp as a fresh razor protruded from each of the fingers.

Nausea roiled her stomach. She withdrew her hands from the ice and sat down hard on the basement floor. Her head was pounding. She pressed her cold palms to either side of it. Somewhere in the recesses of her brain, Josh crowed, "See? I told you!" Her pulse was racing. She felt hot, feverish. The floor seemed to tilt under her, and she was lying on it. She could not draw in enough breath. Her body was light, almost hollow. She was moving away from it, into darkness that gave the sensation of movement, as if passing through a tunnel. She

14. AFFILIATION

opened her eyes to light. Brilliance flooded her vision. She gasped, and heard it at a distance. She jerked her hands to her face, but found her arms

weighted with something that rattled and rustled as she tried to move them. Her entire body was covered in the stuff. Panic surged through her. She thrashed from side to side, up and down, the medium that held her snapping and cracking as it shifted around her. There was something wrong with her arms and legs. They were sluggish, clumsy. The brightness before her eyes resolved into shapes, triangles, diamonds, blocks, jumbling against one another. With a crash, her right arm broke free of its confinement. Her hand flailed on the rough surface of the material. She braced her forearm against it, and pushed her head and shoulders into the air.

She was in a large box, filled, she realized, with ice. That she could see this was no less remarkable than the circumstance itself. Her head had emerged near one side of the container. If she stretched her neck, she could take in more of the space around her. The figure lying beside the box startled her. She gasped again—and heard it from the woman's lips. In a rush, she took in the sweater and faded jeans, the hair in its shoulder-length cut, the round, freckled face, its eyes wide and unfocused (and the colors, God, was this what color was?)—

—and she was looking at a dark blur that kept all except the outermost limits of her vision from her. Above, something moved in Grandpa's freezer, shoving ice from side to side, spilling it on the carpet. She went to sit up—

—and was in the box, her head hanging over the side. Her hands clutched the metal of the box. Below her, the woman on the floor shivered. Her face was flushed, her breathing rapid. She reached a hand to her, and what already had registered peripherally—the pebbled skin, patterned with dark swirls, the three fingers, each taloned, the thumb almost too far back to be practical, armed with its own claw, longer and more curved—shouted itself at her, bringing with it a thunderclap of understanding. A fresh wave of nausea swept her, but it was the woman on the floor who coughed and vomited. For a moment, less—

—she was spitting out the remains of a partially digested Danish—

—and then she had heaved herself out of the box (Grandpa's freezer) and went stumbling across the basement floor, pieces of ice dropping from her on the way. Her legs were different—out of proportion in a way she

couldn’t assimilate. Some of the bones had been shortened, some lengthened, the angles of her joints changed. Her balance was shot. If she stood straight, she felt as if she was about to tip over onto her back. Not to mention, the sight of everything around her, which kept tugging her head this way and that, further unbalancing her. She had developed a fair estimate of the basement’s appearance, but it was as if, after having encountered water a handful at a time, she had been dropped into the ocean. All of it was so *vivid*, from the swirling grain of the paneling on the walls to the spiky texture of the carpet, from the squat bulk of the freezer to the sharp edges of the cardboard boxes stacked around the floor. On top of that, the rest of her senses were dulled, practically to nonexistence. She struck the wall at the foot of the basement stairs, and realized that she hadn’t felt the collision as painfully as she should. *Grandpa*, she thought, and half-pulled herself, half-climbed towards the door at the top of the stairs.

As she pushed through into the kitchen, an image burst across her mind’s eye: a man, looking over his shoulder at her, his eyes widening with the shock that had stunned the rest of his face. He appeared to be wearing a gray suit jacket, but there wasn’t time for her to be sure, because he was replaced by another man, this one dressed in a white robe and a white headdress, his mouth open in a shout that she heard (“*Ya Allah*!”), his eyes hidden behind sunglasses in the lenses of which something awful was reflected as it bore down on him, claws outstretched. She caromed across the kitchen, slamming into the breakfast bar at its center. The tall, glass cylinders in which Mom kept the cereal toppled onto the floor, where they detonated like so many bombs, spraying glass and corn flakes across the tiles. She stepped away from the breakfast bar, and was staring down at a man whose eyes were rolling up as blood bubbled from his lips, over his scraggly beard, and the claws of her right hand slid deeper into his jaw. The next man she saw was dressed in a tuxedo, the white shirt of which was turning dark from the wave of blood spilling down from the slash to his throat. She lurched out of the kitchen, down the hallway to the stairs to the second floor. The sightless eyes of a fair-haired boy (*Jim*?) whose throat and chest were a ruin of meat and bone stared at her while a man’s voice wailed somewhere out of sight (*Grandpa*?). A lab-coated man held out his hands in front of him as he retreated from her. She shouldered aside the

door to her grandfather's portion of the house, and saw the terrified expression of a young man whose round, freckled face and curly hair marked him as Josh, while her grandfather's voice screamed something (*"Is this what you wanted? Is it?"*).

The door to Grandpa's bedroom had been left ajar by the home health aide. She shoved it open and crossed the threshold.

Despite the unbridled insanity in which she was caught up, a small part of her thought, *So this is what his room looks like*. It was larger than she would have anticipated, the far corner filled by a king-sized bed draped with a plaid comforter. Next to it, a nightstand held a lamp that could be bent to direct its light. On the other side of it, her grandfather sat dozing in a recliner. A coarsely knitted blanket covered his legs and lap; under it, a thick, heavy robe wrapped his chest and arms. His face was as she'd imagined it: the flesh sparse on the bone, the mouth downturned at the corners, the nose blunt as a hatchet, the eyes sunken, shadowed by the brows. Lines like the beds of dried rivers crossed his skin, which had not lost the tan his years in the sun had burned into it. The stroke's damage was visible in the sag of the left half of his face, which lent it an almost comically morose appearance. The ghost of her and Josh's mocking mimicry of him flitted through her memory. She leaned closer to him.

He opened his eyes, and she leapt back, thumping into a wall as she did. Although his eyelids raised ever-so-slightly, his voice remained level. Nodding, he said, "Wondered if it might be…you." His tongue slid over his lips. "Tried with…Jim." He shook his head. "Couldn't…leave remains. Beast needed…to eat…" He shrugged. "Lost…Joshua…"

Had he attempted the same experiment with Josh? Did it matter? Like a swell of lava rising over the lip of a volcano, anger rolled through her, carrying her deeper into the thing she was inhabiting. She crouched forward to steady herself. She could feel the claws jutting from her fingertips, the fangs filling her mouth. Anger swelled within her, incinerating everything in its path. She drew back her lips, and hissed, a long, sibilant vent of rage that summoned her grandfather's attention from whatever memory had distracted him.

He saw her teeth bared, her claws rising. Something like satisfaction crossed his face. “That’s…my girl,” he said.

“They have the power of calling snakes, and feel great pleasure in playing with and handling them. Their own bite becomes poisonous to people not inoculated in the same manner. Thus a part of the serpent’s nature appears to be transfused into them.”

—Nathaniel Hawthorne, *American Notebooks*

For Fiona, and for Ellen Datlow, a most belated birthday present

Episode Three: On the Great Plains, in the Snow

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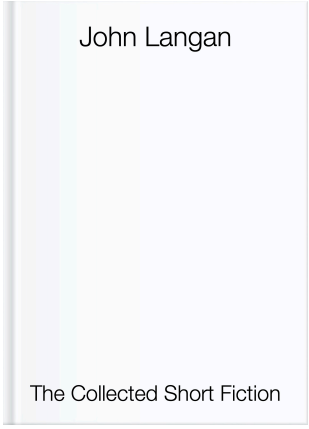

> "Oh bury me not on the lone prairie"
> —"The Cowboy's Lament"
>
> "It's like I told you last night son. The earth is mostly just a boneyard. But pretty in the sunlight," he added.
> —Larry McMurtry, *Lonesome Dove*

I

The two ghosts—*impressions*, Lynch corrected himself, that was how Melinda insisted on referring to them—stood considering the wreck. It was some kind of van: Lynch didn't recognize the make; although its snub-nosed front put him in mind of the space shuttle (time was, he'd known cars as well as anyone). The vehicle had been bulled off the road onto the frozen ruts of the field beside it. It had been struck on the left side. You could see where the doors had buckled under the force of the blow. Funny that it hadn't rolled, or at least tipped, over. Probably had something to do with the height at which the object that had collided with it had done so (time was, he would've known why that was, too, understood the underlying principle if not the exact equations demonstrating it). The roof had been peeled open; rudely, he thought, the way a child tore the foil off a piece of chocolate. Long gouges grooved the van's crumpled side, its hood. The windshield was a frozen explosion. Scattered around the van were shredded pieces of its seats, a white and red cooler apparently intact, half of a heavy blanket—a quilt, maybe—and assorted articles of clothing: sweatshirt, snow boot, baseball cap. Balanced on the hood, rocking slightly in the wind that

whistled like a child trying to find a tune, was a squarish block of plastic. Lynch couldn't identify anything more than its geometry, wasn't sure—

"It's part of a car seat," Melinda said. She'd noticed him staring. "A child's car seat."

Ah, that was why he hadn't placed it sooner. His own children were… Anthony was twenty-four, wasn't he? He had been at some point. His memory was particularly bad, this moment, the worst it had been in the last three weeks. He tried to concentrate on his family, his children. Anthony the oldest, twenty-four. Katie was… what was she? Twenty-one? Maureen… Eighteen? Seventeen? Regardless, his children were all long past the age of car seats. (Though hadn't there been a grandson? Anthony's—Jordan, perhaps? He had a sudden vision of a little boy wearing a red sweatshirt and hugging a toy dinosaur.)

"Shall we take a closer look?"

"What for?" he said.

"I don't know. Isn't that what you're supposed to do?"

Wasn't it? "In TV shows," he said, "in TV shows about the police." He turned to her. "Were you a member of the police?"

"No."

"Then we might as well stay here until the real police arrive. Maybe we'll learn something, then."

"You just want to stand here?"

"The wind isn't bothering me."

"The wind—I'm going to check this out."

"Wait." But she was striding away from him towards the—what had been the van.

"It isn't as if I'll disturb anything," she called over her shoulder.

Not because he shared her desire to view the carnage up close, but because he didn't care to stand over here, across the road, by himself, with nothing but miles of empty field around him, Lynch hurried after her. It was strange to find himself squeamish, now, past the point of all hurt, but he was sick with dread at the prospect of seeing what might be left of the car seat's

former occupant. He had been fond of violent movies, horror movies, war movies—had been watching one when Anthony was born, he remembered, something with Vincent Price, lurid Technicolor—but this: there was blood everywhere, splashes on the hood and roof, streams down the windshield and sides, puddles cupped by the frozen earth. It was as if someone had sprayed the scene with a fire hose of the stuff. He had been the one to tend the kids when they injured themselves, or were vomiting-sick (he had a flash of a nail embedded in the spongy sole of a flip-flop, weeping blood), but who knew, who knew the human body had so much blood in it?

Not to mention, the things he tried to confine to the corners of his vision as he came up behind Melinda, a rope of what might have passed for sausage, a carmine slab of something, a scattering of pale chunks. Could he pass out? He wasn't sure, but this seemed like the test. He looked at Melinda, who had stopped beside the driver's door and was leaning forward, attempting to peer around the splotch of blood in the middle of the window. Voice thick, he said, "See anything?"

"Only what you do. How many do you think there were?"

"I don't know. What does a van like this hold? Four, five, six?" There had been five people in his family.

"You can squeeze eight people into one of these things," she said. "Two in the front, three in the middle, three in the rear." She glanced at him, at his expression, and added, "But I don't think there were eight people in here. Four, five tops."

"It's enough."

"Yeah."

The air was full of snowflakes, again, which, he'd noticed, was how it started snowing out here. No gradual increases, no few flakes leading the way down for more and more after that: this was like being inside a giant snow globe you hadn't felt being shaken. The air was clear, and then it was thick with snow that didn't fall so much as swirl into existence. These flakes were small, almost freezing rain. Faintly, a siren wailed.

"Finally," Melinda said. "That guy in the Saab must've called them, after all."

“Let’s stand back,” Lynch said, “and let them do their job.”

“Why? Don’t you want to know what they find?”

“To be honest, I don’t think they’re going to find much. Not any more than we have.”

“You never know.”

“Can we please move away?”

“All right, all right, no need to raise your voice. We’re all on the same side, here.”

“Thank you.”

Through the snow, the source of the siren appeared, a police car, its roof rack strobing red.

Lynch said, “That’s it?”

“What were you expecting?”

“More than a single car. An ambulance, at least.”

“He was probably closest. Besides, what good do you think an ambulance would do?”

“Suppose someone—”

“Someone isn’t.”

He had nothing to say to that.

They watched the police car roar up to the site, its brakes screeching at the last minute. It was a local unit, its driver so overwhelmed by what was visible to him from inside his car that he forgot to shift into Park before opening his door. The car stuttered forward, almost spilling him out of it. He lunged inside, threw the transmission into Neutral, and yanked up the parking brake. For a moment, he sat with his head on the steering wheel, no doubt telling himself that he could handle this. He raised his head and reached for his radio. Lynch could hear him reciting the string of codes that shorthanded the situation. He thought the cop sounded about sixteen. Once he had completed the call, the cop replaced the radio, reached for his hat, and stepped out into the snow. Lynch was surprised to see him wearing a baseball cap instead of the wide-brimmed quasi-cowboy hat he’d assumed was part of the general police uniform in this neck of the woods. The cop

had his hand on his gun; although he hadn't drawn it. He called, "Hello? Can anyone hear me?" as he advanced across the road towards the van, his face draining of color. He started to identify himself, then caught sight of something on the ground before him and threw up.

"Very nice," Melinda said.

"He's just a kid."

To his credit, the cop wiped his mouth with the back of his hand and continued forward on shaking legs. "Hello?" His voice so tremulous a strong gust of wind might have carried it away. "Is anyone…" Obviously, he couldn't decide how to finish the question. Alive? Here? In one piece? As he neared the van, he unholstered his gun.

"Oh, right," Melinda said. "As if the bad guy's waiting to jump out at him."

Gun in his right hand, right wrist grasped by his left hand, both hands out in front of him, down but not too low, the cop surveyed the van's interior, then began to circle it, stepping left foot across right. His eyes were cartoon-wide. Lynch guessed he was telling himself to focus on the details and finding that none too easy. By the time he had completed his circuit of the van and was backing away from it, new sirens were audible.

"The cavalry arrives," Melinda said.

There were three more police cars—two local and one state—and an ambulance. The trooper, a wide brim over his startled face, practically leapt out of his car shouting questions and commands. The first cop croaked answers, the remaining two returned to their cars and sped off up and down the road to block it. A pair of EMTs, a tall man with a beard and an even taller woman with a ponytail, emptied from the ambulance and started arguing with the trooper about whether they should approach what he was insisting was a crime scene, what they were calling an accident. The first cop told the trooper to let them have a look, then told the EMTs they weren't going to find anyone. They didn't. After they'd made their search, they retreated to the ambulance, on whose hood the woman placed her gloved hands and leaned over, while the man walked into the field on the other side of the road. He walked as if he had someplace to be, some destination in mind, and did not stop walking when the woman raised her head, caught sight of him, and called his name. She abandoned her spot at

the front of the ambulance to run after him, reaching him in long strides and catching him in a bear hug that he did not return.

"I see what you mean," Melinda said. "Just look at the difference they made."

Without answering her, Lynch turned away and began walking north along the road, towards the town. The fear, horror, that had flared in him had burnt out, leaving ashy sadness. Right now, he wanted nothing more than to put as much distance between himself and the blood and ruin that had been a family on their way somewhere. Was it Christmas? Were they driving to a grandparent's house to exchange presents? He hadn't noticed anything that resembled wrapping paper, boxes… while it was snowing, he didn't think it was Christmas. He thought the snow was more because of where they were, which he couldn't quite name but which he was pretty sure was somewhere in the broad middle of the country, someplace like South Dakota or Wyoming, a state where they had snow more often than they didn't.

Melinda followed him. "Hey," she said. "Where're you going? The professionals are here. Don't you want to watch them work, see what we can learn?"

He kept walking. He had a feeling he had been the one to do the teasing in his family. He recalled Anthony, frustrated to the point of tears because the zipper on his jeans was stuck open. They were cheap jeans—K-Mart special, or maybe Marshall's—but Lynch hadn't been able to resist cracking wise about his oldest's inability to zip his pants. How old had his son been? Thirteen? Fourteen? The years of maximum self-consciousness. No surprise to find it wasn't as pleasant on the other side of the barb.

"Ah, never mind," Melinda said, falling into step beside him. "We already learned what we needed to."

He couldn't help himself. "What was that?"

"You tell me. What did you notice?"

"Notice? You mean, aside from the blood, the carnage, the parts of people I don't have names for?"

"I'm sorry. It was pretty rough, wasn't it?"

"Pretty rough, yeah."

“So what did you notice?”

“What…” He stopped. “What—all of it. I saw all of it.”

“Then you saw what was missing.”

“Besides whoever did this?”

“They’re long gone. I told you that.”

“I don’t know, nothing.”

“Nothing’s right.”

Tumblers fell into place. “They were. The family… their ghosts.”

“Impressions, and they weren’t. They should have been there, all of them. We shouldn’t have had to speculate about how many of them there were. We should’ve been able to count them, ourselves. Don’t know that they would have been all that much fun to talk to. Anyone who’s gone through something like that—well, sometimes they never come out of it. But even if every last one of them had been standing there screaming, we should have seen them.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means things just got a lot more serious.”

II

The bar, whose name hadn’t registered, had a plain wooden floor scattered with sawdust, onto which patrons at the dozen or so tables around it dropped the broken and empty shells of the peanuts they scooped from the bowls in front of them. Lynch was fascinated by this, didn’t think he’d seen anything like it before. A jukebox whose contours were drawn in yellow and red neon finished singing in the big voice of a man who kept insisting that ladies love country boys and switched to the softer, slower sound of a woman wrapping her rich voice around her funny Valentine. Lynch sat up straighter.

“What is it?” Melinda asked.

“I know this.”

“What?” She nodded at the jukebox. “Ella?”

“Yes,” he said, “Ella. Ella Fitzgerald.”

“Funny, I didn’t tag you as a jazz fan.”

“Yes.”

“Not that I figured a jukebox in here would have Ella Fitzgerald on its play list.”

Lynch supposed she meant the men with their cowboy hats and boots, the women in their flannel shirts and jeans, but the contrast that impressed Melinda skated over him. His wife had given him an Ella Fitzgerald CD for Valentine’s Day, a compilation. He could see the picture of Ella on its front, a sepia photograph that showed her from the waist up, wearing an off-the-shoulder gown, her generous mouth open to utter the lyrics of some song or another, the members of a big band out of focus on the risers behind her. Had he freed it from its plastic wrapping? He couldn’t recall, didn’t think so. He was going to wait until he was home from the hospital, wasn’t he?

Melinda remained silent for the rest of the song, while Lynch drank in Ella’s almost-girlish voice, the saxophone tracing her words, the steady whisper of the brushes across the drums. How long ago… he had been standing in a friend’s basement den; the friend’s name was a blank but his almost comically broad face, broad forehead, curly hair, square jaw, and square glasses were vivid in his memory. The two of them—three, Anthony had been there, too—the three of them had stood in the dim den in the late afternoon light while Lynch’s friend, who seemed like an old friend, someone he’d known for decades, eased a record from its sleeve, positioned it on his turntable, and lowered the needle into place. The hiss of the needle tracing the vinyl had given way to a brash, bright trumpet, which had yielded to a man’s voice, deep as a well, rough as gravel, which had been succeeded by Ella’s (*I Got Plenty o’ Nuttin’*)—Armstrong, Louis Armstrong, Louis and Ella. Anthony had surprised him by turning to show a huge grin. “This is great,” he had said, and Lynch had felt suddenly, unexpectedly close to his son.

With a shimmer of cymbals and a flourish of notes from the saxophone, the song on the jukebox ended and was replaced by the vibrating twang of a guitar set to a country complaint. Lynch looked at Melinda, who was surveying the rest of the bar, and said, “Thank you.”

“It’s important to do stuff like that when you can. It helps you stay… coherent longer.”

“Maybe I should wait for it to come on again.”

“Some do,” Melinda said. “Not that they hang around jukeboxes for that special song, but they attach to places that, you know, had meaning for them.”

“But you didn’t.”

“No, I didn’t. For that matter, neither did you.”

“No.”

“You sound less than happy. Is that what you would’ve wanted, hovering over their shoulders, watching them grieve?”

“I…”

“Worse, watching them stop grieving, get on with their lives.”

“It would have been something.”

“It would have been nothing. You would have drifted off to the basement, attic, some corner of the house or another, and sat there moping. Every now and again, when everyone was asleep, you’d have gone for a walk, wandered from room to room feeling miserable, spooking the cat.”

“We didn’t have an attic. Just a crawl space.”

“Oh. How about a cat?”

“Yes. A white cat, with a black mark on her forehead. The kids named her __”

“Spot?”

“Ashley. For Ash Wednesday, you know.”

“Not really. Anyway, the point is, it wouldn’t have been long until you’d faded to next to nothing, just a tissue of a couple of unconnected memories. A year, two at the outside. And not long after that, you wouldn’t have been anything more than a cold spot, a disturbance in the atmosphere. Your wife, kids, would’ve walked through the space that was you and shivered, rubbed the goosebumps on their arms and wondered if they’d left a window open. You can’t honestly tell me you would’ve wanted any of that.”

“I would have been with them.”

“No, you wouldn’t. You think you would have, but trust me, that kind of situation—the inertia—it sticks to you. I’ve seen it, seen guys who had the same idea as you reduced to a single word they keep whispering as they melt into the wall. Not pretty. Believe me—this is better, way better.”

“This?” Lynch raised a hand to the room. “This place? I can’t even remember its name.”

“It’s not much on the ambiance, I’ll give you that. But they do have Ella on the jukebox.”

Despite himself, Lynch smiled. “Yeah.”

“Hey—remember when you got here and you thought it was heaven? I guess it kind of made sense, what with all the white around, but still.”

“Well, I revised my assessment the minute I met you.”

“What are you talking about?” She sounded almost aggrieved. “You count yourself damned lucky if I’m the angel waiting at the end of your tunnel of light. Just see how well you do on your own. Five minutes, and you’d be roaming the streets, scaring people half to death with your moaning.”

“‘Half to death’: very funny.”

“Whatever.”

The jukebox exchanged one country song for another that Lynch knew, Kenny Rogers rasping “The Gambler.” After a moment, he said, “So what about this van?”

“What about it?”

“What happened to it?”

“That’s what we’re trying to figure out.”

“That’s what I’m trying to figure out. I’m the new one, remember? I think you know exactly who did this.”

“You’re wrong.”

“Then you have a very good idea.”

“No, nothing that would count as very good.”

“Stop playing word games.”

“I’m not. The most I’ve got is a couple of facts I don’t like very much.”

“There was no one, no *impression*, at the accident scene. We already said that.”

“Yeah,” Melinda said, “but what it means… the thing that did this—you figure it has to be some kind of animal, right?”

“I don’t know about that,” Lynch said.

“Have you ever seen a collision between two cars that looked like that?”

“I haven’t seen many—any accidents at all, if that’s your reference point. Bad as it was, though, if another car had been involved, I can’t imagine it would have been in any kind of shape to drive away.”

“Yes, exactly.”

Lynch held up his hand. “But there’s no animal that could have done that to a van. Maybe a bunch of tigers, or polar bears, only those things don’t hunt in groups, do they? Not to mention, they’re pretty scarce in these parts. No, I think what happened to that family was the fault of people, some kind of gang, or a cult, maybe.”

“How do you explain the damage to the van? You saw the shape that thing was in, like a bag of potato chips that’d been torn open. Not to mention the family—their physical remains. I saw you trying not to look too closely, but you know what I’m talking about. There’s a gang of super-strong cannibals on the loose, waylaying hapless motorists?”

“It’s better than rabid polar bears.”

“Not by much.”

“What, then?”

“Something that makes me uber-nervous. Something strong enough to push a decent-sized van that must have been going a decent speed off the road, get into it, and devour the passengers, body and soul.”

“I thought we weren’t souls.”

“Figure of speech. Something that can consume their flesh and their impression on the quantum subjectile—their ghosts. Better?”

“What can do that? You’re describing a monster.”

Melinda nodded. “I am.”

“And you’re serious.”

“It’s what fits the facts.”

“A monster?”

“For all intents and purposes, yes.”

“And this is better than the super-strong cannibals how?”

“Would it help if I called it a self-precipitating and -perpetuating anomaly that’s accumulated sufficient energy to allow it to pierce the ontological membrane?”

“Monster it is, then.”

“Don’t look so offended. You can’t tell me you never saw this kind of thing on the way here. It hasn’t been that long since I made the Walk; I know what it’s like. There’s that long, blank time when you don’t know anything. Then you realize you’re moving, shuffling along a road, which looks an awful lot like one of the main roads you live near, except that it’s colorless, not white or gray so much as *faint*, a pencil drawing done on cheap paper. Whatever lies to either side of you is too vague for you to make out, but you don’t worry about that very much, if at all. You’re surrounded by people all around you, some heading in your direction, the rest bound for God-knows-where. Just about everyone’s dressed in one version or another of normal clothing; although maybe you see an old woman over there who’s in her nightgown and slippers, a guy over here who’s too old and fat for the baseball uniform he’s squeezed into. To your right, there’s a kid—you thought he was a kid, sixteen or seventeen, but when you turn your head again, you see he’s fifty if he’s a day. That’s a little strange, but it isn’t as bad as the woman ahead who keeps *flickering*. While you watch her, she goes from being stick-legged twelve to broad-hipped thirty, like a jump-cut in a movie. You look down, and maybe the hand you hold up looks a little rough at the edges. A few folks try to walk together—could be you’re one of them—but it doesn’t last long. For one thing, you can’t hear each other too well. It’s as if your ears are clogged. Even your own voice sounds as if it’s coming more from inside your head than your mouth. For another thing, you can’t stay focused on what anyone else is saying long enough for a meaningful exchange. Your mind keeps returning to this question, to the Question: What happened to me?

“But it’s a question that isn’t really a question. It’s a placeholder for an image. You, stomping the brake and steering hard to the right as the truck backs out of the alley directly ahead of you. Or you, lying in a hospital bed wired to a host of machines, a ridge of bandages rising over the fresh scar up the center of your chest. Or you, stepping backwards as the kid holding the gun sweeps it in your direction, this lavish gesture that he probably picked up in a movie he watched in rerun on Channel 9. You see his index finger tightening on the trigger, and then—

“That’s just it, though: there isn’t any *then*. There’s that moment, then this moment, this place that looks vaguely familiar, but it’s like looking through a lens smeared with Vaseline. The only thing that seems one hundred percent, undeniably real is the compulsion that’s drawing you forward, step-by-step, east west north south. You don’t have a way to describe it. It’s like nothing you’ve felt before, as if you’re an iron filing and the biggest magnet in creation is saying, *Come to me*. What can you do? So you walk.

“And on the way to wherever it is you’re bound, there are these people. A man wearing a black suit fifty years out of date, the collar of his shirt open, the ends of an actual bowtie flapping out from under the collar in the wind that blows up as the guy approaches you. From his thin hair, the lines of his face, you take him for an old man, until he draws near enough for you to tell that he isn’t, he’s maybe the same age as you, he just has one of those old faces, and probably has since he was in his twenties. It’s the kind of face he would’ve spent all his life trying to catch up to. There’s about two days’ worth of blond stubble on his chin, his long cheeks, which is odd—not that you’ve made a survey or anything, but the other men you’ve noticed so far have been by and large clean-shaven. Even the couple of guys with beards you’ve run across have been pretty well-groomed.

“The man comes closer to you—he staggers, lurches, as if his legs don’t work properly, the knees stiff, the hips locked. It’s like when you’re a kid and you play at being Frankenstein’s monster, those same exaggerated motions. All he needs is both arms held out in front of him. They aren’t, though. His arms weave and windmill to either side of him, trying to help his balance. He draws closer to you, bringing with him this smell, a thick stink like milk well on its way to becoming cheese. You would think the wind that surrounds him would clear the air, but it’s as if the smell is

threaded through it. Right before this guy reaches you, clamps one hand on your shoulder, leans toward you, so that you can see his eyes are the same blank color as the road—right then, you realize that this is the first thing you've smelled since—since the scorched rubber of your tires scraping over the blacktop; or the flat, antiseptic hand-sanitizer that your family has to rub over their hands when they enter your cubicle in the ICU, and that clings to their fingers as they slide chips of ice between your lips; or the thick grease the man pointing the gun at you applied to it before he left his apartment to walk to the little bodega you like to stop at for a glass bottle of Mexican Coke.

"When the man, this old-young man in the black suit that has a vest, too, speaks, his voice is a distant shriek, as if the wind around him is carrying it from a long distance. You can't understand everything he's saying, but you hear words like, 'Over here,' and, 'Please,' and, 'Salvation.' The man is gesturing for you to follow him, to leave the road for a place off to one side. The terrain in that direction does seem to be a little more distinct. There are other people there, a surprising number of them. They're standing around a huge bonfire—it's orange, the brightest color you've seen since you started walking. You can't believe how good it feels to see something that vivid. It's almost enough to send you off the road into this… pocket.

"What stops you is the figure on the opposite side of the fire from you. You have a hard time seeing it clearly, because the fire's giving off a lot of heavy, black smoke, but it looks enormous, far taller than anyone you've met, and wider, too. Its proportions are wrong, the arms too long, overdeveloped, the chest massive. Its head is narrow, rising almost to a point, as if it's wearing some kind of helmet, and you have the absurd thought that this is no person: it's an ape, a gorilla; although it's nothing like the animals you've stared at in zoos or watched in nature documentaries. This is something that pulls itself up skyscrapers with one hand while swatting airplanes with the other. You're afraid, because how could you not be? But you're fascinated, too, by the sight of something so fantastic. There's still a chance you'll go with the man in the black suit, follow his distant scream, until, trying to peer through the smoke, you see that what the fire's burning are bodies, men and women who continue to move as the flames roar over them. You have the impression that the smoke is being

inhaled by the thing on the other side of it—that maybe the smoke *is* it—but you're already moving away from the place, running along the road, in terror that whatever you've witnessed is going to abandon its spot and come after you.

"You wonder what all of this is. It's a question you'll have the chance to ask yourself several more times on your way to whatever your destination is. If you're lucky, you'll be pulled in the direction of one of the major currents, and once you enter it, you'll be whipped along at what feels like a thousand miles an hour. If you're less fortunate, there's more walking in your future; maybe a lot. Either way, in the course of your journey, you'll see a number of other pockets, some of them pretty elaborate, all of them presided over by huge figures that seem as if they were dreamed up for a Hollywood soundstage."

As ever, Melinda told a good story. It shared enough details with Lynch's actual experience to have him nodding. "Yes," he said, "but I thought you told me the creatures in those pockets were confined to them. Also, that they were made up of the people in the fires, that the men and women in the pockets surrendered themselves to the flames to keep the creatures going."

"That's not the point," Melinda said. "The fact is, there's a whole lot of weird shit out there, so don't be too surprised that we're dealing with some more of it."

Lynch's reply was swallowed in the wave of sound that swept through the bar. It came from his right, where the wall behind the jukebox burst inwards in a spray of wood and drywall. Dust swirled across the floor, blown by the freezing air that rushed into the room. For an instant, the jukebox gave voice to a man insisting that he was so much cooler online, and then a second wave of sound surged through the room. It was a roar, though such a roar as Lynch could not remember ever having heard. Half freight-whistle and half avalanche, it shook the glasses on the tables, clattered the liquor bottles against one another. At the bar, someone screamed, and that solo noise swelled to a chorus when the author of the roar thrust its great head through the breach it had forced.

What Lynch saw reminded him of an alligator, if that alligator's head had been as long as a tall man. Jaws lined with fangs like carving knives

thundered together as the head swung right and left, chasing after the women and men who scrambled out of its way. An eye the size of a saucer rolled in its socket. Lynch could see the thing, its pebbled flesh, which appeared feathered in a few places, but he could also see through it, to a bleached skull that would have been at home in a museum display. *Tyrannosaurus Rex*, he heard Anthony's voice say. *King tyrant-lizard*. He shook his head. The beast sucked in a mighty breath, and unleashed a fresh bellow. Lynch backed into the booth. A busboy who had dropped to the floor when the wall exploded slipped as he scurried to his feet, and the monster darted its head to catch him as he fell. Its teeth scissored him in half with a wet crunch that vented blood into the wind. Droplets spattered Lynch, who cried out and rinsed his arms against them.

Melinda seized his hand. "Come on," she said, "while it's occupied."

Lynch didn't argue. Still holding her hand, he bolted for the door, past the enormous head jerking towards the ceiling as it gulped the busboy down.

Outside, the early evening was full of snow and screaming and the distant whine of sirens. Melinda steered them to the extended porch of the second building up the street from the bar. Lynch flattened against the space between a pair of windows. Melinda remained at the edge of the porch.

"Come back!" Lynch hissed. "It'll see you."

"Hear that?" Melinda said. Through the screams and the approaching sirens, Lynch heard the crack of timbers snapping, the rattle of debris on the ground. "That's it leaving."

"Leaving? Where's it going?"

"Back out there," Melinda said, nodding towards the plains. "It's moving fast. I figured we'd have at least a few days before it tried the town. Then again, who knows how long it's been on the loose, already?"

"Okay," Lynch said. "Okay." If he acted as if he were calm, maybe he would be calm. "What now?"

Melinda had no answer.

III

On what Lynch thought was the north side of town, a solitary black mailbox stood on the street side of a large, vacant lot. Lynch was reasonably sure there had been a house and barn here at some point; on a couple of his and Melinda's previous stops at the mailbox, he'd had the impression of a pair of large, boxlike structures, one closer to the road, the other farther back, neither quite visible, both more like the smudges left after an eraser has cleared the blackboard. Each time, he had intended to ask Melinda about the phenomenon, but the message she'd read on the letter she withdrew from the mailbox had pre-empted his question. This morning, nothing was visible in the lot except a few tufts of scrub grass poking through the crusted snow. Lynch supposed this was for the best. He hadn't appreciated how exposed this location was: only one more street of small warehouses separated the mailbox from the expanse of the plains, dazzling white under the early sun. He didn't need any distractions from the vigil he was doing his best to maintain. Had he been a soldier, once? He thought so; though it was more of the obligatory-duty variety, not the active-wartime type. Hard to imagine that combat experiences, however intense, would have prepared him for the beast that had thrown the jukebox crashing over.

After a restless night spent within the bland confines of a modest Protestant church, Melinda had set out for the mailbox. Lynch had started to protest the recklessness of her decision, but she had cut him off, asking, "What makes you think we're any safer inside? That thing didn't seem to have any trouble breaking down the wall to that bar." All the same, Lynch wanted to say, there was a difference between the beast coming looking for you and you putting yourself out where it could find you. But already, Melinda was out of earshot.

Lynch didn't understand the black mailbox. Aside from the two of them, he doubted anyone could see or touch it, but with its chipped black paint and flag broken at the base, it had a strangely substantial feel, as if whoever had leveled the house and barn it served had intended to remove it, as well, but failed to complete the job. Once a day, he accompanied Melinda to it so that she could lower its front door and check its oblong interior. There was almost always something inside, usually a letter in a denim-blue envelope whose flap Melinda split with her thumb. She would read the letter twice,

return it to its envelope, and replace the envelope within the mailbox, which she shut. As yet, she had not shared any of the messages with Lynch.

Instead, presumably following directions she'd received, Melinda led them to a different part of the town or its surroundings. There, they performed a task whose significance was generally lost on Lynch. A day or two after he arrived here, they ventured to the dirt alley separating a pair of houses, where Melinda handed him a shovel he hadn't noticed her carrying and directed him to dig at a spot a foot and half away from one of the houses. Lynch, who would never be sure of the exact relationship between his present form and the world he continued to inhabit, took the shovel and sank it into the ground. About two feet down, the blade rang on metal. Working more slowly, Lynch cleared the dirt from a bronze disk the diameter of a dinner plate. Its surface was incised with tiny symbols that Lynch didn't recognize. He pried the disk loose and raised it on the shovel to Melinda, who took it with heavy gloves he hadn't seen her tug on. After he refilled the hole, and leaned the shovel against the house where she told him to, Lynch returned with Melinda to the mailbox. He guessed its opening would be too small to fit the bronze plate, but Melinda angled the disk and the mailbox accepted it without difficulty.

On another occasion, they passed unhindered and unchallenged into the recesses of the town jail. On the wall of one of its cells was an elaborate graffiti that Melinda copied onto a slip of paper whose destination was the mailbox. A third time, they made their way into the large rest home on the west side of town in order for Melinda to stare at an old woman whose face had so many lines, it was difficult to pick out her eyes and mouth among them. Of course, Lynch had asked what the purpose of their actions was, but Melinda had deflected his questions with one of her own: "You had plans?" If he persisted, she told him that what he was asking was above his pay grade, and refused to be drawn any further. Her answer was the same when he asked who, exactly, was sending the messages.

Today, the mailbox yielded a padded envelope whose contents jingled as Melinda tore it open. She removed a letter and a pair of keys from it. Lynch watched her face as she read and reread the letter, but could discern nothing from her features. She replaced the letter in the mailbox, and held onto the keys. "This way," she said to Lynch, and started in the direction of the next

street and its warehouses and, beyond, the open plains. Lynch had no desire to walk any distance out of town; in retrospect, their trip to survey the remains of the van the previous day seemed to him the height of recklessness. Neither did he want to abandon Melinda; in the time that he'd been here, she had been essential to him adjusting to… everything, to all of it. He wasn't sure she was an irresistible force, but he was no immovable object. Following arguments with his wife, hadn't he apologized first? After confrontations with the kids over infractions of the house rules, hadn't he sought them out in their rooms, mock-bullying them into reconciliation? Nonetheless, the white expanse sparkling in the distance made his throat constrict with dread.

Melinda led them into the shadowed space between a pair of darkened warehouses. Some kind of car sat in the middle of the passageway. Eyes dazzled by the sun, Lynch did not register the vehicle as anything more than smallish, low to the ground. Melinda stopped beside the driver's door. Bending at the waist, she slotted one of the keys she'd received from the mailbox into the lock. She swung the door wide and surveyed the car's interior. "You drive?" she said.

"Yes."

"Stick?"

"Uh-huh."

"Okay, then." Straightening, she snapped her wrist. The keys arced through the air. Lynch lunged at, caught them. He said, "Hang on. We have cars?"

"Car," Melinda said. She was circling to the passenger's door. "Chop chop."

A two-seater, the car's age was apparent in the rips in its buckets seats, the roughing of the steering wheel and dashboard. Surprisingly for this location, it was a convertible. Lynch leaned over to unlock Melinda's door, then slid the key into the ignition and turned it. The engine came to life with a coughing growl. Something about the deep rumble felt achingly familiar. Lynch put in the clutch, pushed the gearshift into first, and let the clutch out slowly. The car eased along the passageway into daylight. As it did, Lynch saw that its hood was white, its fenders a burnt-orange that might have

faded from red. He jerked his foot off the clutch. The car lurched and stalled.

"Is there a problem?" Melinda said.

"This car," Lynch said. "I know this car."

"Okay."

"No, you don't… it's an MG—I can't remember the model, has a V8 engine. It was my, my fantasy car, you know? For when I won the lottery. One summer—we were on vacation—we used to vacation at a little lake somewhere north—the Adirondacks, I think. We rented a cottage just up from the beach. The couple who owned the place had a son who was the same age as my boy. Their youngest. Most days, the boys hung around together, building sandcastles, catching bullfrogs, going on hikes around the lake. The mother and father were nice enough. I can't recall their names. I talked cars with him a couple of times each trip. Nothing too involved, but he knew I liked the MG. One afternoon, he came down to the cottage and asked my wife if he could borrow me for a little while. She said, Sure, take him.

"I couldn't figure out what he wanted me for. He was big into his beer, too—thought of himself as a connoisseur. I wasn't, not really, but I'd traveled for work, places like Germany and Belgium, where I'd tasted some decent beer, so this man liked to share whatever beers he'd discovered with me. It wasn't beer, though: it was this." Lynch spread his hands to take in the car. "Somehow, he had found an MG for sale at a price he was willing to afford. He knew I'd appreciate the purchase. The car looked a little worse for wear, but the engine ran fine. We popped the hood to check it. Anthony, my boy, was around, playing with the man's son. Both boys came over to admire the car. The man turned to me, and asked if I wanted to take the car for a run. At first, I thought he was saying that he was going to try out the car and was inviting me to come along—which would have been fine. But no. He handed me the keys and told me the car could use a good run.

"It was so unexpected, so… generous. I felt the way you do when something good just happens to you, out of the blue. I asked Anthony if he wanted to go for a ride. He did. We belted in, and off we went. The top was down, which made it hard for us to have much of a conversation. But I

could see the expression on his face. He wasn't that old, maybe eight or nine. He was putting on his best serious face. I'd never included him in anything like this, before, and he was trying to show he understood it—its importance. The sheer pleasure lit up my face. I loved to drive. I didn't get my license until I was in my twenties, but the minute I did, it was as if the driver's seat was where I was born to be. My son had a toy: I can't remember what it was called, but it was a kind of a space-age centaur, except, instead of horse's legs, it had four tires. My wife said that was me.

"Anyway, I took the car to a highway and went all the way up to fifth. Probably too fast. Definitely too fast. If there had been a cop there, he wouldn't have had to use his radar gun. There weren't any cops. I don't think there was anyone on our side of the road. To the left, there was a mountain, leaning back to a round peak. On either side of us, the scenery whipped by, but in the distance, that mountain turned very slowly.

"I could have kept going, would have driven all the way to Canada and back. I wonder if Anthony remembers it." Lynch shook his head. "What is this car doing here?"

"Waiting for you to drive it," Melinda said.

"You know what I mean."

"I can't tell you."

"More information that's above my pay grade?"

"Probably, but that isn't why. I don't know why this particular car was waiting for us. I do know that we don't usually use cars because of the risk of drawing undue attention to ourselves. We exist beyond the limit of most people's perceptions. Give us a car to roar around in, and we move that much closer to visibility, which causes all kinds of complications. That we're sitting in this vehicle tells me how serious the situation with this creature has become."

"All right," Lynch said.

"I heard a theory, once," Melinda said, "that your impression on the subjectile can form a kind of bond with other impressions. Doesn't work for people, otherwise, you'd be surrounded by your loved ones, right? But maybe it applies to objects."

“Huh,” Lynch said. “It’s a pity I never owned a bazooka. You?”

“Closest I came was a shotgun, which, I think you’d agree, is not up to the task.”

“No,” Lynch said. “Where are we going?”

“The battleground. Think you can find it?”

“We’ll see.” He let out the clutch, and steered onto the street.

IV

What Melinda called the battleground was a shallow bowl in the landscape maybe five hundred yards across. It was five miles north-northeast from town, along a narrow road that followed the twists of a wide creek. Melinda had taken Lynch to the place the third day after his arrival, as a lesson in blending in with the living. A small tour bus ferried interested tourists out to the site, waited a couple of hours for them to wander its grounds, read the plaques positioned around it, and visit the gift shop, then carried them back to town. The bus was never full, Melinda said, which allowed the two of them to steal aboard and take one of the seats at the rear, where they found it relatively easy to escape detection, except for a toddler, a girl in blue overalls, who would not stop staring at them.

Not to worry, Melinda said, kids—little kids—saw all kinds of things adults didn’t.

When he and Melinda had exited the bus, Lynch had been struck by the noise, a cacophony of screams, shouts, cracks, and booms, which none of the other passengers appeared to notice.

It filled the air this bright morning, as he and Melinda stepped out of the MG. Per her instructions, he had driven the car to the far end of the parking lot—empty at this early hour—then up the access road that led the short distance to the bluff that overlooked the large dip in the earth. Lynch parked there; though he observed that a dirt version of the road continued down into and across the snowy expanse.

“Well,” Melinda said, “what do you think?”

Lynch couldn’t remember what the name of the battle was. It was part of the larger struggle between the United States Army and the natives of the

northern plains that had flared in the decade following the Civil War. Some thirty or forty cavalry had ridden straight into a significantly larger contingent of Lakota and Cheyenne. The physical engagement between the forces was over in less than an hour, and resulted in the devastation of the Army forces. Its place in the history books had been overshadowed by the events at the Little Big Horn, a short while after. Here, however, in this intermediate existence, the battle had not ended. Lakota warriors, their bodies dyed yellow and red, their feathered headdresses streaming behind them, rode their horses between cavalry officers who struggled to draw a bead on them with their long pistols. A handful of soldiers fired their rifles from behind the barricade they had improvised of their dead horses. A trio of Cheyenne warriors shot the soldiers who were attempting to position a pair of small cannons near the top of the slope opposite. Men shouted commands and obscenities. Clouds of gray smoke floated across the ground, over puddles and pools of blood. Holes burst open in men's heads, their chests, where bullets struck them. Arms, feet, hung dangling from where they'd been shot. Unhorsed Native warriors swung heavy clubs at the soldiers who swung the butts of their rifles at them. Men screamed in exultation and agony. Rifles snapped. The cannons thudded. In ones, twos, more, men died—then continued the battle, rising unwounded to attack one another anew. Above the scene, the smoke gathered in a great knot whose contours suggested a fist.

The first time Lynch had seen this place, had watched the tourists wandering its grounds, blissfully ignorant of the horror continuously unfolding around them, he had demanded an explanation from Melinda. For once, she had answered him directly. Some events, she had said, were sufficiently traumatic that their participants remained caught in them, long after they occurred. War, violence, tended to produce that result. Did that mean these men were trapped here, like this, forever? he'd asked. Melinda had shrugged. They'd been here this long.

The cannons boomed, dirt geysered, and Lynch understood what Melinda was proposing. Here was an army for them to employ. "Would that work?" he said.

"If we could lure it here, maybe."

"But," he gestured at the combatants. "It hasn't stopped any of them."

“That’s because they’re caught in this event. Bring someone, or something else into it, and the situation becomes a lot more dangerous.”

“What about all of them?” He nodded to the men.

“I suppose it’ll rip most of them to shreds; though the horses might help. I’m not sure how fast the thing can run.”

“What’ll happen to them?”

“They’ll cease to exist,” Melinda said. Before Lynch could voice the objection forming on his lips, she added, “Which is harsh, yes. But is it any more so than what they’re trapped in, now? Who was it said that hell is repetition? What do you think this is for these guys?”

“And who says you get to make that decision?”

“If you have a better idea, I’m all ears.”

A half-dozen proposals flitted through his mind, each relying on a crucial detail whose impossibility rendered the rest of the plan useless: he and Melinda revealing themselves to the town’s authorities; those men and women understanding and accepting what actually was happening; detonating the fuel tanks of one of the gas stations in the center of town; procuring an M1A1 Abrams tank. He shook his head. He’d already figured out who was going to be leading the beast here, too.

V

As he turned out of the parking lot, Lynch said, “I’m pretty sure I know what this creature is.”

“A Tyrannosaurus, right?”

He nodded. “T. Rex.”

“It looked different in the movies. Less of those little feathers. What makes you so sure?”

“Science projects. For school: my kids.”

“Huh,” Melinda said. “Okay.”

Science projects: the words were keys, unlocking the padlocks on a cache of memory. He had helped all of his children with their annual entries for the school science fair, which he recalled describing (to whom?) as the bane

of his existence, elaborate posters and models whose design and construction were inevitably delayed until the night before the event. (One of the girls—Katie?—had been somewhat more responsible, beginning her projects a weekend or two early.) Anthony, in particular, had little interest in science proper. Hadn't Lynch encouraged him to build a basic pulley, and hadn't he rejected the idea through his apathy towards it? The topics in which his oldest was interested: The Loch Ness Monster, UFOs, Bigfoot, had skirted the edge of legitimate science, to put it mildly, and while Lynch had built models for him in his basement workshop out of Plaster of Paris, he'd done so with a dull annoyance souring the process.

A patch of ice on the road ahead burned phosphorous-bright with sunlight. Lynch squinted and eased off the gas.

The exception had been Anthony's third grade project, when he had selected dinosaurs as his topic. Lynch had known his son was interested in the great beasts; the enthusiasm appeared general amongst the boys his age. Certainly, Lynch had purchased enough plastic and rubber replicas of the creatures for Anthony to have a plentiful supply with which to populate the diorama they fashioned on Lynch's workbench. What he hadn't counted on was Anthony's passion for actual dinosaurs, which had resulted in his son attaining what seemed to Lynch an encyclopedic level of knowledge of the vanished animals, from their Latin designations to their habits to the precise eras during which the various species had roamed the planet. A pair of figurines he'd assumed showed the same bipedal carnivore did not: the one with the slightly more-developed forelegs was Allosaurus, who had lived tens of millions of years before the larger-headed Tyrannosaurus Rex. Lynch had held Tyrannosaurus up for inspection as Anthony described its six-foot skull, its long jaw lined with six-inch fangs. Believe it or not, Anthony had said, paleontologists weren't sure if T. Rex hunted its prey, or if it was a gigantic scavenger, like a vulture or hyena.

The monster whose teeth had bit a man in two was Anthony's Tyrannosaurus, and from the way it had snapped at the men and women fleeing from it, it had no trouble chasing its meals down. "How is this even possible?" Lynch said.

"You do realize the irony of your question," Melinda said.

“By that logic, this place should be overrun by thousands more creatures like that one. Not to mention, all the animals that have lived here since then.”

The road veered towards the creek, whose surface consisted of thousands of shards of light. Lynch accelerated through the curve.

“Touché,” Melinda said. “From what I understand, the subjectile consists of layers. It’s like the bottom of the sea: things drift down and settle there and, over time, you wind up with this stratified structure. What belongs to a particular era tends to remain at that approximate level, so to speak. There’s some movement possible between levels if they’re relatively close, but beyond a certain, limited range, you’re pretty much stuck where you are.”

“So eventually we’ll become what? Fossilized ghosts?”

Melinda looked away. “Not exactly. It’s more a case of, we’ll be sealed off within our layer.”

“That doesn’t sound much better.”

“Don’t worry about that. What matters is, this is why you haven’t been chased by hordes of hungry velociraptors, or stalked by a saber-toothed tiger.”

“However,” Lynch said, “I have seen more than I would have liked of a Tyrannosaurus.” The things you’d never think you’d say.

“True,” Melinda said. “There are fissures in the subjectile, cracks that extend deep—very deep, in a couple of cases—into it. They’re dangerous—unstable—but if you could navigate one, you might be able to cross a tremendous part of the structure.”

“That would have to be a pretty significant break, for a dinosaur to come up it.”

“There are a couple that go back a ways, and a new one could have formed. It’s also possible the T. Rex found its way along a series of smaller cracks, like a rat solving a maze.”

“What happens if we don’t stop it?”

“It continues to chow down on the living, gaining strength as it does.”

“But eventually, the Army—the modern Army—will come in and blast it.”

“Eventually,” Melinda said. “In the meantime, people continue to die horribly, deprived of any chance of a continuing existence. Even after the Army shows up, depending on when exactly this is, they may find it harder to deal with the thing than they’d expect. By then, the T. Rex will have ingested a lot of energy from its victims, which will tend to make it more resilient.”

“You make it sound like some kind of vampire.”

“That isn’t too far off.”

“That…” In front of him, the road wavered, as if a sheet of water had slid over the windshield. Instinctively, he downshifted, tapping the brake as he did. The engine whined at being forced into lower gear. “A…”

As clearly as if he was standing beside them, he saw Anthony and his son, Jordan. They were in a narrow room, its walls peach, its floor carpeted (cream), one end occupied by a small bed whose blue frame was the shape of a sports car—Jordan’s bed—they were in Jordan’s bedroom, in the house Anthony and his wife were renting in that village with the French name (Arles? St. Marie? Lyon?). Anthony was lying on the floor, on his left side, his head supported with his left hand. Jordan was sitting across from him, all of his five-year-old’s attention focused on the assortment of toys spread out between them. Lynch saw rows of plastic cowboys and Indians, all cast in the same bright red and yellow. Opposite the figures, a handful of Matchbox cars and trucks lay overturned. Jordan’s small hands gripped a plastic Tyrannosaur that was almost too big for him. It was painted red, with almost fluorescent purple stripes wrapping its back. Between its shoulders, a rectangular button protruded which, when Jordan pressed it in, opened the toy’s mouth and caused it to emit an electronic roar. Anthony held a Matchbox car between the thumb and index finger of his right hand that he drove in circles over the carpet, making revving-engine and squealing-tire sounds as he did. “I’m gonna get you!” Jordan shouted, shaking his dinosaur.

“No way, man,” Anthony said, grinning. “This is an MG, the fastest car ever made.”

“I have T. Rex!” Jordan said. “Rawr! Rawr!”

“MG’s faster than T. Rex,” Anthony said.

“Oh no he isn’t,” Jordan said.

“Oh yes he is,” Anthony said.

“Well—he’s a vampire!” Jordan shouted.

“A vampire?” Anthony said. “Uh oh…”

“LYNCH!” Something slapped his right cheek, hard. “We’re in the middle of the freaking road!”

“What?” He turned, and, for a moment, did not know the woman sitting next to him. Face stinging, he closed his eyes, certain that, when he opened them, he would be someplace else: a hospital bed, most likely, wired to a dozen different devices charting his steady decline, surrounded by his wife and children, their faces forecasting the grief due to arrive. But the sight that greeted him was the same as the one he’d left, the woman he knew was Melinda facing him across the interior of the MG whose engine was rumbling away, while the air outside filled with snow.

The expression on Melinda’s features blended concern with irritation. “Whatever’s happening to you,” she said, “can it wait long enough for you to move us out of the path of any oncoming traffic?”

Already, this existence had settled upon him like a cat that rises from your lap, only to position itself there more comfortably. “It’s—I’m fine,” he said, and put in the clutch.

VI

Here the road ran straight through the plains. Had the remainder of the drive to the town been longer, Lynch supposed Melinda might have spent more of it quizzing him about what had happened. As it was, he answered the single question she put to him by saying he’d just remembered something—a memory he didn’t care to discuss, he added—and that seemed to be enough for her. It was far from sufficient for him, in no small part because it wasn’t true. Enough of his life, his previous life, his living life, remained opaque for him not to be sure, but he didn’t think he’d witnessed the scene of Anthony playing with Jordan. It didn’t have the familiar, the comfortable feel of his actual memories. At the same time, some quality of the exchange he’d observed struck him as authentic. Which

meant what, exactly? That his son and grandson were aware of the posthumous drama in which he found himself an actor? Or that Lynch was in some way playing out the situation they were enacting? It could be a coincidence, but if so, it was such a one as to push the idea past the point of breaking.

Ahead, on the right-hand side of the road, sat the single trailer that marked the farthermost limit of the town in this direction. Although the snow had picked up, the great rent in its middle was clearly visible. A ribbon of black smoke wound up from the trailer's interior to the clouds assembling overhead. Lynch slowed, glancing at Melinda.

"There's no point," she said. "We know what we'll find."

"All right," he said, "where to, then?"

"The Highway. Maybe someone will have seen something."

What Melinda called the Highway ran due north out of town. The name was as much metaphor as description. A path wide enough for a half-dozen people to walk abreast, the Highway rode the contours of the land out to a junction that was lost in the distance. An irregular but unceasing flow of people left the town walking the route, most of them finding their way to it from the rest home on the west side. Their ultimate destinations were unknown to Lynch and, so she claimed, to Melinda. It was the Highway that had brought him to this place that, yes, he had mistaken for Heaven, because where else could the journey he'd taken have led? In the days since, he had avoided the path, half-afraid that, were he to stray too close to it, he would be caught by it and find himself embarked on a fresh odyssey.

Given what Lynch recalled of his early moments on the road that had led him away from the place of his decease, he was skeptical of Melinda's plan. On the other hand, he hadn't encountered any dinosaurs on that route, so maybe it was worth a try, after all. He turned right at the first intersection. To his left, a dozen streets deeper into the town, the firehouse's siren sent up its mournful call. The falling snow seemed to dampen it.

"The trailer," he said.

"You hope," Melinda said.

A left onto a side street, a right onto a road that ran between rows of weather-beaten houses, another left onto a long driveway that dead-ended in a small parking lot, brought them there. The Highway commenced at the other side of the parking lot, a flat path whose dull white surface appeared to consist of some kind of rock. Lynch did not see anyone in the parking lot, nor on the road. He pulled the parking brake, went to turn the key.

Melinda said, “Wait.”

He did. “What?”

“Take us out there,” she said.

“Is that allowed?”

“Is there anyone stopping us?”

“That’s not the same thing,” he said, but he released the brake and rolled the car onto the Highway. The snow was streaming down, large white flakes whose individual designs he could almost pick out. Although they eddied around the car, none of them landed on the windshield, the hood, or stuck to the windows. On either side, the plains were veiled by white.

Lynch felt the dash for the controls to the radio. “What are you doing?” Melinda said.

“Trying to find the radio.”

“You want to listen to music, now?”

“It calms—”

“Hang on,” Melinda said, “what’s that?”

“What?”

“That.” She pointed at a spot on the road maybe ten feet ahead on the right. Lynch slowed the car to a crawl as he followed the direction Melinda indicated. For a moment, he could pick out nothing except snow falling behind snow, then the shape Melinda had noticed came into focus. The size of a small bird, it appeared to be floating a couple of feet off the ground with a lazy motion that reminded Lynch of a balloon. Which was ridiculous. He brought the car to a stop and flipped on the headlights. The snow caught most of the light and flung it back, but the shape did not. By the glow of the headlights, Lynch saw that it was a human hand, an adult’s, most likely,

severed at the wrist. Palm up, fingers outstretched, it rotated in a slow circle.

Nor was it alone. Suspended at different heights along the road in front of them, a variety of body parts formed a grisly constellation: a pair of hands, one clenched, one open; a foot, toes pointed down as if for ballet; an arm and part of a shoulder, ribbons of blood trailing from its ragged edge; and a head in the approximate center of everything, the open eyes reflecting the headlights, the mouth slack, the heavy white hair swaying around it.

"God…" Stunned, Lynch did not register the massive shape looming behind the carnage. When the Tyrannosaur lunged forward, sending body parts spinning off like marbles, its vast jaws open, he hesitated, shocked, before dropping the car into reverse. The MG jolted to the right as the beast's jaws smashed the windshield and tore the roof. Lynch cried out and threw his arms in front of his face. With a shriek of torn metal, the T. Rex pulled its head up, taking the roof and half of the windshield with it. Snow rushed into the car. Lynch simultaneously let out the clutch and floored the gas. The car lurched backwards, heading for the edge of the road. He caught the steering wheel, cut it to the right, and once the car was in the center of the Highway, straightened out. He half-turned in his seat, to see the direction he was reversing. As he did, he saw Melinda's seat empty, the top half of it bitten away.

VII

Lynch crested the bluff overlooking the battlefield, downshifted into second, and plunged down the dirt road that led into the thick of the continuing battle. The road was smoother than he had anticipated; though not enough for him to shift to third. At least the snow seemed to be abating. Hooves thudding on the ground, a brown horse carrying a painted Sioux warrior galloped in front of him. A trio of soldiers fired their rifles after the man, and Lynch heard the bullets zip overhead. The stink of gunpowder clotted the air. A Cheyenne warrior aimed his rifle at the three soldiers, and his shot struck the MG's trunk with a hollow ping. On the left, a pair of cavalry officers, their pistols held out in front of them, raced past.

He had been hoping to cover half the battleground before the Tyrannosaur arrived. He was maybe a third of the way when its roar split the air. A glance over his shoulder showed the creature already rushing down the road after him, its great head swaying from side to side as its powerful hind legs propelled it forward, its tapered tail out behind it as ballast. *Big*. It was so big. He had never appreciated how stupendously big these animals had been. He heard young Anthony's voice saying that a full-grown T. Rex would have been longer than a city bus, but that had been an abstraction, an illustration on a page, two-dimensional. In no way had it prepared him for the beast in 3-D, its bulk, black and yellow, the back ornamented with what appeared to be feathers, its mouth jammed full of razored fangs, its sheer, relentless vitality. He had assumed he would have to drive slowly enough for the Tyrannosaurus to keep up with and keep its interest in him. He had been wrong. From the start, the creature had moved with a speed and stamina that had required what skill he possessed as a driver to outrun, even as he steered the road winding out here. Now, hampered by this dirt road he was struggling not to skid along, he was losing the slender lead he'd maintained on the animal.

A bullet chipped a piece off what was left of the windshield. Lynch flinched. A Cheyenne warrior leapt his horse across the car. The Tyrannosaur's roar drowned out the rifles cracking around him. He looked back, saw its jaws almost at the trunk. He stomped the gas, heard the bite crash where he'd been. He shifted to third, fighting to hold the car to the road as it bumped and bounced over it. Bullets rang on the passenger door. With a thunder of hooves, half a dozen cavalry flanked the car, keeping pace with it. Lynch saw the men looking at him, seeing him, attempting to fit him to the scene in which they'd acted for so long. In a few of their expressions, a terrible knowledge hovered. One man waved his pistol at Lynch, who couldn't tell if the gesture was intended as threat, or request for him to pull over. The T. Rex bit the man off his horse, taking a chunk of the horse's back with him. The horse screamed and thrashed, mortally hurt. The other riders peeled away, only to circle around and begin firing their guns at the creature. In an instant, it was off the road and among them, knocking one soldier and his horse to the ground with a blow from its head, then falling on them. A swipe of its tail took the legs out from under another

horse, rolling it over on top of its rider. A quartet of soldiers bunkered behind the carcasses of their horses shifted their aim from the Sioux warriors racing past them to the beast and delivered a volley into its flank. It wheeled and leapt at them. For their part, the Sioux swung their rifles away from the soldiers and sighted on the thing's head.

Halfway across, the access road leveled off and ran straight to the foot of the slope where the twin cannons were positioned. Lynch saw the soldiers stationed at them pause in their duties to consider the situation unfolding below them. To either side of him, Native warriors and U.S. soldiers had stopped their bloody routine to observe the monster fighting their colleagues. A few were riding or running in the direction of the new threat. The MG's engine whined as Lynch raced the remaining distance to the bluff. Behind him, the Tyrannosaurus roared in answer to waves of gunfire. Funny, he thought, how in movies, you were supposed to find these creatures sympathetic, even root for them against the humans—whereas his sole desire at present was to return this example of the species to the extinct category.

When the road climbed the far slope, Lynch put in the clutch and let the car's momentum carry it part of the way up; then, before it slowed too much, he dropped into second and closed the rest of the distance to the cannons. Once he was beside the artillery, he braked hard, letting out the clutch too fast and stalling the car. It didn't matter. He flung open his door and ran to the handful of men in sweat-stained blue shirts and grimy grey pants. They watched him approach, their eyes enormous. Young—most of them were Anthony's age, younger; the oldest couldn't be more than thirty. *Orders*, he thought. *These boys are soldiers. They need orders.* "Who's in charge, here?" he said.

A fellow with yellow sergeant's chevrons on his sleeve stepped forward. He had a long nose, a droopy mustache, a checkered bandana knotted around his neck. Voice raspy, he said, "I am."

"How good is your aim?" Lynch said.

"Good enough."

Lynch pointed toward the T. Rex. "If you can hit the head, do it. If not, the chest. I don't know how fast you are; I do know how fast that thing is. If

you miss the first time, you might have a second. The beast won't give you a third."

The sergeant nodded. Turning, he said, "All right: you heard the man."

While the soldiers prepped and aimed the guns, Lynch surveyed the battlefield. As far as he could see, every last man on it had forsaken the round of actions that had occupied him the last century and a half to join the attack on the Tyrannosaur. Sioux, cavalry, Cheyenne rode this way and that around the animal, weaving in and out of one another's paths as they emptied their rifles and pistols into its hide, searching for weak spots. From positions farther out, men on foot maintained a steady stream of fire at the animal. For its part, the Tyrannosaurus ranged amongst its attackers, darting its head to bite the head from a horse, catching a man under one of its rear legs and crushing him to the ground, spinning and knocking a pair of men from their mounts with a blow from its tail. In the short time it had been on the field, the creature had cut the number of men on it in half. Bodies and pieces of bodies lay strewn across the earth. Overhead, the low, dark cloud that Lynch had observed during his previous visits to the site seemed to draw down closer to the earth.

Someone tapped his shoulder: a private, his features waging their own struggle to keep up with what was happening. "Sir?" he said. "Sarge says you may want to cover your ears."

Lynch clapped his hands to his head a second before the cannons erupted, venting fire and smoke in a pair of blasts that buffeted him. One shot went wide, but the other struck the T. Rex on the right hip, staggering it almost off its feet. Enraged, the creature swung in the direction of this new assault. Sighting the soldiers hurrying around the cannons—as well, Lynch thought, as the car it had chased here, in the first place—the thing bellowed and began a halting run towards them. What men remained on the battlefield, realizing the hurt that had been done the Tyrannosaur, renewed their efforts. A group of Sioux and Cheyenne ran at the animal's wounded leg, long clubs and knives out in their hands. A cavalry officer shot close enough to the dinosaur's left eye for it to whip its head around and bite him in half. Next to Lynch, the soldiers loaded the cannons. A Sioux warrior drove his knife into the creature's right foot; it jerked the foot up and out, impaling him on its claws. Despite its injuries, the beast was almost at the start of the bluff. It

was met there by the dark cloud, which had been descending from its place above, drawing in on itself as it went, gaining in definition, until what crashed into the T. Rex was almost the same size, a smoky assemblage of limbs that reminded Lynch of nothing so much as a great hand, seizing the Tyrannosaur in its outsized grip.

A vision of Anthony and Jordan at play flickered before his eyes. Anthony was on his back, laughing, the Matchbox MG held aloft in his left hand, his right hand grabbing Jordan's toy Tyrannosaurus, which Jordan, who was sitting on Anthony's stomach, was pushing forward with both hands.

The cannons boomed, the slap of sound deafening. The first shot punched through the cloud-thing and the Tyrannosaur's chest behind it. The second shot struck the dinosaur high in the throat, blowing out the back of its skull. The combined force of the impacts toppled it onto its side. The cloud-creature fell with it.

VIII

Afterward, there was no cheering, no celebration. Looking as if they had awakened from a particularly savage nightmare, the few men who remained began to walk in the direction of the town and, Lynch supposed, the Highway. His hearing had not returned to normal, so he was startled by the soldier who appeared beside him. His mouth moved, and Lynch heard his words as if through ears stuffed with cotton. "Sir," the young man said, his eyes darting between Lynch and the MG, "are you an angel?"

What would Melinda have said to that? The memory of her stilled his urge to laugh. Instead, he shook his head. "Just a man."

"This," the soldier said, the word straining to carry the weight of the men lying in whole and in part across the landscape, the enormous ruin of the Tyrannosaurus, the cloud-thing draining into the earth, even Lynch and the car. "What is all this?"

How should he answer? A game played by his son and grandson? A dying hallucination? The posthumous firing of a few, random brain cells? He considered the soldier standing there, swaying as if drunk. Whatever fantasy this might be, Lynch decided, he could remain loyal to it.

“I suppose,” he said, “you could call it an exorcism.”

Tragôidia

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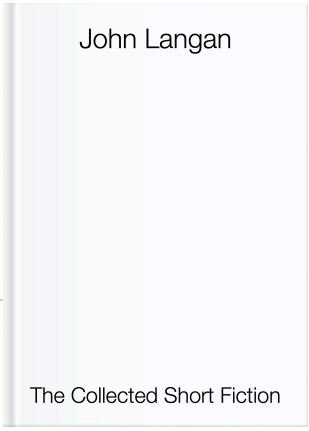

Dying—he was in sufficient pain to suppose—James Bourne lay in the back of Pascal's ridiculous half van, his Kangaroo, being driven along the road east from Aigues-Mortes. He had not been to the local hospital often enough to be certain, but he had a strong suspicion Pascal was not headed in its direction. At a guess, they were racing for Provence, for the Camargue proper. That was all right: he could die there as well as anywhere.

The worst part was his teeth. As much as anyone could, Bourne had become accustomed to the pain in his shoulders, his hips, his knees. He had taught himself how to move in ways that did not add to his discomfort, and when such discomfort was inevitable, how to move quickly and calmly. He had accepted the shriveling of his desire, and of his cock. To be frank, now that the chemo was done, and his gut no longer felt as if it had been scraped raw, he could tolerate the disintegration of his bones in much better spirits.

His teeth, though: none of the doctors had been able to account for the ache that spread from them through his gums into his face. It prevented him from reading for any length of time. Such pain was not part of the general list of symptoms for metastatic osteosarcoma, so they had blamed it on the chemo—until he finished the treatment and his teeth showed no improvement. For the doctors, it was one more reason for the "atypical" with which they prefixed his diagnosis. Already, he had had the sense that he was moving from a patient to a paper, an interesting case to be presented at their next professional conference. They increased the dosage of his pain medication, and the most honest among them estimated that, at the rate the disease was progressing, his teeth wouldn't be a concern for much longer.

For a short time, the stronger pills had helped to quiet his teeth, had allowed him to concentrate sufficiently to complete his arrangements for traveling to Provence, to finish his final re-reading of Keats's poems. By the time the flight attendant rolled him off the plane in Marseilles, however, two of the pills were barely adequate to the task. (He had tried three, but they had plunged him into a thick blackness through which the pain had stalked him like a hungry beast.) After he had arrived at the *auberge*, Pascal had brought him pitchers of sangria, and these, combined with the medication, had allowed him to savor a plate of Pascal's *daube*, served with the creamy rice particular to the region. "It's a miracle," he'd proclaimed through a mouthful of beef. Pascal had grinned broadly.

It wasn't, of course. The time for miracles, if ever it had been at hand, was long past. A few days after his arrival, the mix of wine and medicine began to lose its efficacy. He experimented with increasing the amount of sangria he drank, but it had little effect, and anyway, it was a shame to treat the wine as a means to an end, and not an end in and of itself. A brief period of grace had been his: he would try to be satisfied with that.

There were five of them. One grabbed his chair from behind and dumped him onto the alley's cobblestones. The rest set to work with their feet. They were holding long sticks, which they used next. Bourne struggled to shield his head with his arms. The sticks struck his body with dull thuds. He could feel his bones not breaking, but pulping. His attackers were men, far older than the late adolescents he would have assumed would mug an old, crippled professor. One of them was wearing an expensive-looking leather jacket. He wanted to tell them to take his wallet, it was in the knapsack draped across the back of his chair, they were welcome to its meager contents. But one of the sticks had connected with his jaw, and his mouth was numb.

He imagined Pascal had run for the police. He would not have blamed him if he had run away at the sight of five men armed with sticks.

The world withdrew. He wondered if it would return. Perhaps it would be better for everything to end like this, unexpectedly, quickly.

When the world came back, it brought Pascal's worried face hovering over his. A group of men surrounded him. He did not think they were the same men who had beaten him. At Pascal's command, they knelt beside him, took hold of his arms and legs, and hoisted him off the ground. An avalanche of pain swept over him. By the time it had passed, he was sprawled in the back of Pascal's Kangaroo, and they were driving east.

A week after Bourne checked-in to the *auberge*, while he was sitting outside his room by the pool, soaking in the heat of the midday sun, Pascal appeared with a narrow glass bottle half as long again as his forearm and a pair of plain glasses. Hissing when his fingers touched the hot metal, he grabbed one of the chairs scattered on the concrete apron surrounding the pool and dragged it next to Bourne's wheelchair. He unstoppered the tall bottle, and poured not insignificant portions of its clear contents into the glasses. Bourne accepted the glass he was offered, and returned Pascal's silent toast.

The *eau-de-vie* hit him like a blow from a big man. He was sure his expression betrayed him, but Pascal pretended not to notice. Instead, he leaned in close and said, "It's bad, this sickness."

"The worst."

"That's why you come back here?" The sweep of his hand took in the *auberge*, the Camargue, Provence.

"Yes."

"For the Marys?"

"The town?" Bourne said. "Or the church?"

"The church."

"Why? Have there been reports of miracles performed there?"

Pascal shrugged.

"No," Bourne said, "I was never that good a Christian. I used to tell my students I found the Greek gods more to my liking. I fancied I could feel them here, next to the Mediterranean where they had flourished for so long. But now… 'Great Pan is dead,' eh?"

“What does that mean?” Pascal said.

“Nothing. It’s a line from Plutarch, his piece on the failure of oracles. A sailor whose name escapes me heard a voice from shore instructing him to announce the death of Pan to his destination. I think it was his destination. He did so, and there was great lamentation. Report of the incident reached the Roman emperor’s ears, and he took it seriously enough to establish a commission to investigate it.”

“Bullshit,” Pascal said. His cheeks were flushed.

“I—”

“You know who Pan was? Everything.” Another sweep of the hand. “He was one of the old gods—as old as Zeus, maybe older. You think something like that dies?”

“I never knew you were a pagan.”

“Eh.” Pascal looked down. “My father had many books about these things. He told me about them.”

“He was a scholar?”

“Something like that. He is dead many years.”

Another sip of the liquor brought more words to Bourne’s tongue. “I was going to write a paper about Pan—about his presence in the literature of the last couple of centuries. English literature, I mean. That’s why I read Plutarch, for background. I was going to start with Keats, *Endymion*. There’s a hymn to Pan in it. Keats calls him, ‘Dread opener of the mysterious doors / Leading to universal knowledge.’ It’s the culmination of a series of descriptions of his role in the natural world. I thought I might talk about Forster, too: he has a piece called ‘The Story of a Panic,’ about a group of English tourists who go out for a walk in the Italian countryside and are overcome by a feeling of inexplicable terror. It’s clear they’ve had a brush with the god. Oh, and Lawrence—he refers to Pan in a short novel called *St. Mawr*. A failed artist described him as ‘the God that is hidden in everything;’ he’s ‘what you see when you see in full.’ ”

“Yes,” Pascal said. “Exactly.”

“Something else I’ll never get around to. I remember thinking I needed to look into Swinburne, to see if I could use him as a bridge between Keats

and the Moderns. Ah, well." He finished the last of his drink. "We have discussed it, so it will not vanish from the world, entirely."

"Nothing does," Pascal said. He refilled their glasses.

When Pascal turned right off the main road, Bourne thought that it was into a driveway, that he had eschewed the hospital in favor of a familiar clinic or doctor. But they continued driving, deeper into the marshland bordering the road. He had the impression that they were traveling a considerable distance; though it was hard to be sure, because they were moving more slowly, and the road they were following bent from left to right and back again, and every time the wheels jolted in and out of a pothole, a white rush of pain filled him.

The road they were on ended in a small clearing. Pascal parked the Kangaroo at the entrance to it. Before he had finished stepping out of the car, its rear doors swung out. The men who had attacked Bourne were standing there. He was too surprised to speak. They grabbed his useless legs and hauled him forward, catching his arms and lifting him out of the car. Led by Pascal, they carried him to the other side of the clearing, where a gap in the wall of marsh reeds admitted them to a footpath. His ruined bones ground together. Pain as immense as the sunlight washing the sky surrounded him.

Mosquitoes whined about his head. Reeds clattered to either side. The men bore him to the foot of a spring the dimensions of a bathtub. Grunting, they turned around, so that he was facing the direction they had brought him, and lowered Bourne to the ground. His head tilted back, and he could look over the water at the stone from which its source poured. Gray, grainy, the rock had been carved into a face whose features had been weathered to the limit of recognition. What might have been horns, or might have been hair, curled above a wide face whose blank eyes seemed to stare into his above the water that poured from its open mouth.

A hand slid under his head, raised it to Pascal crouched beside him. He was holding a dented tin cup which he raised to Bourne's lips. The springwater was cold, a benediction. He felt as if he could almost speak.

The hand was yanked away, and his head flopped backwards. Pascal pressed a knife to his throat, and cut it.

A couple of days after he'd first arrived at the *auberge*, once the worst of the jet lag had passed, Bourne rolled himself down the handicapped ramp at the front door to the dirt lot where the guests parked their cars. The lot was empty. He pushed across it to the thick lawn that reached to the marsh. The chair jounced as he wheeled it over the grass to one of the short trees stationed around the space. Once he was under its branches, he halted. His chest was heaving. His arms and shoulders were searing. Sweat weighted his shirt. He sat gazing at the island of green, where Pascal would hold cookouts if the mosquitoes weren't too bad. Sometimes, he hung lanterns from the trees. Bourne looked at the tall reeds that marked the lawn's perimeter. How long ago was it he had ventured into them, felt the ground slant steeply down to the water?

A chorus of insects was buzzing its metallic song. In the distance, a white bird lifted into the air. He did not know the name of the insects, or of the bird.

Dying was not as hard as he had feared. There was a burning across his throat, and something leaping out of it that must be his blood venting into the air. His body shuddered, too injured already to do any more. Far overhead, the sky was pale blue, depthless as pottery. Closer, water chuckled as the pool was replenished. Then everything went away.

Bourne heard water, and realized that he had never stopped hearing it. He was in water, floating, but when he attempted to stand, his feet found the bottom easily. He rose into darkness—into the night. A crescent moon hung low in the sky. *Artemis's bow,* he thought. He stepped out of the pool and found his legs strong, the thick hair on them saturated. The joints seemed different, as did his feet, which felt hard, almost numb, but he adjusted to the change without difficulty. His arms, his chest—his cock—were large,

bursting with life. Something weighted the sides of his head, but his neck was thick enough to bear it.

In front of him, Pascal and his five accomplices were prostrate on the ground, uttering words in a language he shouldn't have been able to understand but did. They were welcoming him, imploring his blessing. They were the reason for the shape he had assumed; their belief held him to it. It would be simple enough to shuck it, to assume the form of a horse, or bird, or tree, or reed—of anything, of all. *Pan.*

For the moment, this form would do. He caught Pascal by the neck and lifted him one-handed, bringing him face to face with what he'd summoned. Pascal's eyes bulged. The acid stink of urine filled the air. He supposed he owed him a debt of gratitude. He lowered but did not release Pascal. He opened his mouth. It was full of enormous teeth. They bit through Pascal's skull with ease. It crunched like a crisp, fresh apple.

The rest of the men were shaking. Their fear clouded the air. He inhaled it, then brought their god to them.

Ymir

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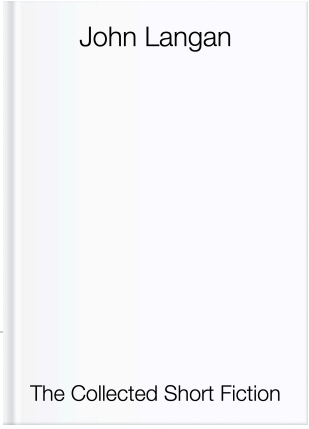

I saw how the night came,
Came striding like the color of the heavy
hemlocks
—Wallace Stevens

I

There was a child standing in the road.

Even as Marissa was jerking her foot from the gas, feathering the brake so as not to throw the Hummer into a skid, she was registering the child's threadbare clothes—rags, really—its bare arms and legs, its uncovered head, all impossible here, a hundred some miles south of the Arctic circle. The Hummer shimmied on the ice. From its back seat, Barret—Barry, he insisted she call him—said, "What is it?"

The child's hair was thick, black, long enough for a girl but not too long for a boy. Its wide eyes were brown; its exposed skin was an olive that had been sun-darkened. Although the Hummer was slowing, it was not doing so quickly enough to prevent it running over the child, the child who could not be here, in the middle of a road across a wide, frozen lake in northwestern Canada, twenty miles from the nearest human settlement.

"Marissa?" Barry said.

What else could it be but a hallucination, a manifestation of the PTSD she'd prided herself on managing so well since her return from the sand, from Iraq? "It's nothing," she said; though she did not return her foot to the gas, yet. "I thought I saw something in the road."

"Up here?" Barry said. "Not likely. At least, I don't think it is. Do they have caribou in these parts?"

“I don’t know.”

The child was ten yards in front of her. History prepared for its first, tragic repetition.

“It wasn’t a polar bear?” Barry’s voice betrayed his eagerness that it was.

“It wasn’t.”

She lost sight of the child beneath the hood. There was no thud of metal striking flesh, no barely perceptible tremor in the steering wheel. When she checked the rearview mirror, no small form lay crumpled and bloody on the ice. Her vision wobbled as her heart surged with relief. She let the Hummer coast until her pulse did not feel as if it were going to burst her throat, then put her foot back on the gas.

II

“You saw some crazy shit over there,” Delaney said. They were on the beach, sitting on the lounge chairs the resort stationed there, passing a bottle of Kahlúa back and forth. Delaney had wrinkled his nose at the sight of the liquor, said he preferred his alcohol to taste like alcohol, not candy, but Marissa said it was what she had at hand, and if he didn’t like it, he didn’t have to drink it. After a night of screwing in her air-conditioned hotel room, they had ventured into the steaming air to watch the sun rise over the Gulf. A pleasant lassitude, yield of the last week’s drunk and the last three nights’ furious sex with Delaney, suffused her.

His words, however, curdled her satisfaction. She said, “Says who?”

“Says you.” He drank from the Kahlúa, grimaced. “Jesus.” He held the bottle out to her. “You talk in your sleep.”

Marissa took the liquor. Across the Gulf, the line of the horizon was becoming more distinct, the sky fading from navy blue to pearl. “What did I say?”

Delaney shrugged. “Nothing too specific. You sounded pretty upset.”

The drink was suddenly too sweet. She swallowed hard and returned the bottle to Delaney.

“I’m guessing you were Army,” he said once it was clear she wasn’t speaking. “I know women aren’t supposed to be in combat roles; I also know things don’t always work out that way. What was that girl’s name? Jessica something.”

“Lynch—Jessica Lynch.”

“Right.”

In the thickets to either side of the beach, songbirds were anticipating the dawn, their whistles long and liquid. She said, “I wasn’t in the Army. I was a driver—private contractor for a group called Stillwater.”

“Weren’t they—”

“They did a lot of security work around Baghdad. But they had their fingers stuck in all flavors of pie. I was in West Virginia, Charleston, driving tankers full of you-don’t-want-to-know-what from one coal plant to another. The money wasn’t nearly as good as you would have expected. Stillwater put out the word they were looking to hire drivers to transport supplies from Baghdad to points all over. Starting pay was three times what I was making stateside, with gold-plated benefits, as well. It was no secret the situation over there wasn’t nearly as rosy as the president and his cronies were claiming, but the Stillwater rep assured me we’d be using only secure roads. I knew it was a risk, but I figured I’d do it for a year, two at the outside—long enough to accumulate a nice little nest egg for myself. I thought I might be able to parley this position with Stillwater into a better one, maybe driving a limo for some corporate bigwig. I had my livery license; just wasn’t anyone interested in hiring me to use it in Charleston.

“Anyway, Iraq was a fucking disaster. Since the roads we were driving were supposed to be safe, they were lightly guarded, if at all. How long do you suppose it took the insurgents to figure that out? The second day I was in Baghdad, the guy who was in charge of my convoy, a big Texan named Shea, took me aside and handed me a duffle bag. Inside it was an AK-47, with half a dozen magazines. ‘This’ll come out of your first paycheck,’ he told me. Called it a mandatory expense. He offered to show me how to use it, but I said I was fine. My daddy’d taught me how to rifle-hunt; I guessed I could work out this thing if I had to. Shea had no trouble with that. He insisted, on penalty of automatic dismissal, that I have the AK on the seat

beside me for the duration of any and all runs I made as part of his team. If we stopped at any location that was not secure, which was everyplace between Baghdad and our destination, I was not to leave my cab without that weapon. Doing so was a fire-able offense.

"Intense, right? Most of the guys I drove with were like that. The Army said they'd do what they could for us, but they'd invaded with too few troops in the first place, far from enough to occupy the country, and with the insurgents popping up all over the place, there generally weren't enough of them available to accompany us. Once in a while, we'd luck into a couple of Humvees with .50 cals. They didn't do much to reassure me, themselves, but I assumed if we came under fire, we had a better chance of getting rescued with them than we did without them."

Above, clouds caught the light of the imminent sun and kindled white and gold. Below, the ocean went from slate to deep blue. Marissa held out her hand, and Delaney pressed the bottle into it. She raised it to inspect its contents, said, "When I started drinking alcohol, this was my drink of choice, this and Baileys. This was in high school, senior year. Girly drinks, the guys called them, but what the fuck did they know. Girly," she pfffed her disdain. "They'd stand around someone's car or pickup, drinking their cheap, crappy beer, showing off their varsity jackets like a bunch of goddamn peacocks flaunting their tails. One kick, and the biggest of them would've been down with a broken leg, a set of busted ribs."

"Tae kwon do?" Delaney said.

"Tang soo do," Marissa said. "Third degree black belt. *Sam Dan*."

"Huh. You keep up with it?"

"Not formally. I train on my own, for what it's worth. What about you?"

"A little of this, a little of that. I'm more a learn-as-you-go kind of guy."

"Is that so?"

"It is."

The Kahlúa was still too sweet, but drinking it no longer made her feel as if she was going to vomit.

"I'm wondering," Delaney said, "if you'd be interested in a job."

III

The Eckhard Diamond Mine was a collection of Quonset huts set back from the rim of a titanic hole in the endless white. Barry leaned forward for a better view of it, whistling appreciatively. “Isn’t that something? How far across would you say that is?”

“A quarter-mile,” Marissa said.

“I expect you’re right.”

She stopped the Hummer at the front door of the metal shed closest to the pit. The light green paint that had coated the structure was visible only in scattered flakes and scabs. She left the motor running: the digital thermometer on the dash measured the outside temperature at forty below, and she didn’t want to risk the engine not starting. For the same reason, she was carrying the heavily oiled .38 revolver in a shoulder holster under her coat. She zipped and buttoned the coat, pulled on the ski mask and shooting mittens lying on the passenger’s seat, and tugged her hood up. She half-turned to the back seat. “You ready, Barry?”

He had encased his bulk in a coat made of a glossy black material that made her think of seal skin. The gloves on his large hands were of the same substance. He drew a ski mask in the gray and electric green of the Seattle Seahawks down over his broad, bland face. “Ready,” he said. “Let’s go look at my new investment.”

Marissa had expected their arrival to draw some kind of reception from whoever was inside the hut. The moment she stepped outside, however, into cold that shocked the air from her lungs, that she felt crystallizing the surfaces of her eyes, she understood why those inside and warm might prefer to reserve their greetings for her and Barry joining them. The cold seemed to take her out of herself; it was all she could do to keep track of Barry as he lumbered the fifteen feet to the hut’s entrance. Without bothering to knock, he wrenched the door open and squeezed through the frame. Marissa followed, giving the area surrounding this end of the building a quick once-over. She wasn’t expecting to see anything besides the Hummer with its schoolbus yellow paint, a steady cloud of exhaust

tumbling from its tailpipe, the great hole in the earth in the background. Nor did she.

IV

“His name is Barret Langan,” Delaney said. “He was friends with a guy I used to work for.”

“Why don’t you take the job, then?”

“I’m happy where I am.”

“What makes you think I’m not?”

“Maybe you are.” Delaney accepted the bottle from her. The rising sun had ignited the sea to platinum brilliance.

She said, “What’s the job?”

“He’s looking for a driver, mainly. But it wouldn’t hurt if you knew how to take care of yourself, which it sounds like you do.”

“Why? What is this guy, some kind of gangster?”

“He’s a man with a lot of money,” Delaney said, “a little of which he inherited, more of which he married into, and most of which he made by taking the money that had come his way and investing it.”

“So he needs, like, executive protection?”

“Not exactly. From what I understand, the guy spends maybe fifteen minutes a day working—talking to his investment manager, that kind of stuff. The rest of the day, he… wanders around.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean he wanders around. He’s in Olympia, right? In Washington. Say he watches something on TV about a donut shop in Portland: he goes to Portland.”

“In Oregon?”

“Yeah.”

“Is that far?”

“For a fucking donut, it is.”

“Is he married?”

“Macy, yeah.”

“And she’s okay with him taking off for Portland?”

“She’s got her own things going, charities, mostly. She’s out of the house as much as he is.”

“Is this her idea? Get him a babysitter?”

“Don’t know. From things I overheard him saying to Wallace—my old boss—he’s walked into some pretty dodgy places. Bars so far off the beaten track, they aren’t even a rumor. Ghost towns that were never on the map to begin with. Old industrial sites. I gather he’s run into some less-than-wholesome characters. Could be he’s just being prudent. Funny thing is, the guy’s enormous, six eight, three-twenty, easy. Hands like canned hams. You’d think the sight of him would be enough to steer most trouble in the other direction.”

“Size isn’t everything.”

“That’s not what you said last night.”

“Really?”

“Anyway,” Delaney said, “the job’s there if you want to look into it.”

The sun had lifted over the horizon, lighting the landscape to gold-tinted colors. Marissa said, “If I were interested in this position, how much are we talking? Fifty? Sixty? I heard some of the guys who ferried around the Stillwater execs drew down as much as eighty.”

“You’d have to do your own negotiating,” Delaney said, “but I can guarantee you’d be making three times that, at least.”

“Jesus,” Marissa said. “Are you serious?”

He nodded. “Understand, you’d have to be available twenty-four/seven.”

“For that kind of money, I’ll sleep at the foot of his fucking bed.”

“You want me to put you in touch with him?”

“Might as well. What’s the worst that could happen?”

“Don’t say that,” Delaney said.

V

Inside, the Quonset hut was a poured concrete floor and metal ribs arching overhead. It had to be warmer than outside, but not by enough to matter. By what light the cloudy windows admitted, Marissa saw that, with the exception of a large, metal cage at its center, the structure was empty. Without hesitation, Barry strode to the cage, which appeared to contain another cage—an elevator, Marissa realized, it was an elevator. Barry swung open the cage door, and stepped into the car, which creaked with his bulk. A black box with a row of rectangular switches had been mounted to his right; he snapped all up at once. Within the elevator, a pair of halogen lights hung in opposite corners flared to life, while the air filled with the nasal hum of electricity. After making certain the door to the place was shut, Marissa crossed to the elevator. It shifted slightly with her weight. A narrow black box with two buttons set one below the other attached to the wire to her left. Barry nodded his ski-masked head at it. “If you would…”

She stabbed the lower button with a mittened finger. The car clattered, shook, and commenced a shuddering descent. Although her face was covered, she supposed her skepticism was evident. She said, “I was under the impression this place was more of a going concern. How long has it been since it was active?”

“As a diamond mine, thirty years, give or take. From the start, it was never as productive as its backers predicted. What diamonds were here were dug out almost immediately. The operation chugged on for a few more years, after which, it was leased to a pair of scientists.”

“Scientists?”

“I met one of them; though I didn’t know it at the time. At one of Manny and Liz Steiner’s parties, a Dr. Ryoko. He and his colleague used the lower reaches of the mine for some type of subatomic research. Had to do with exploiting the layers of rock to slow down the speed of some exotic particles enough for them to be measured. After they left, the mine lay dormant for a decade and half, until a man named Tyler Choate paid a ridiculous sum of money to have the use of the location for three months.”

The elevator lowered past an unlit tunnel. Marissa said, “What for?”

“That is a very interesting question. No one I talked to—and I spoke with a number of people—could answer it. I had to turn to a woman who’s good

with computers to find out exactly how much his rental cost Mr. Choate. I'm used to large amounts of money. This was enough to impress me.

"To make matters more perplexing," Barry said, "Tyler Choate undertook this course of action while an inmate at a maximum-security prison, where he was serving twenty-years-to-life for some especially nasty sex-crimes. Where, as far as I've been able to ascertain, he continues to pay his debt to society."

Marissa was about to ask him if he was sure, stopped herself. Of course he was. When Barry became interested in something—truly interested—he researched the subject as thoroughly as any scholar. Instead, she said, "I'm guessing that Tyler Choate led you to this place, and not the other way around."

"That's right, Barry said. "You're wondering why."

"Yeah."

"When Delaney informed you I was looking to hire someone, he told you that he knew me through his employer, Wallace Smith. Did he tell you what happened to Wally?"

Another dark tunnel rose in front of the elevator door. "Just that he was dead. And," she added, "that Delaney had nothing to do with it. To be honest, he seemed kind of spooked by the whole thing."

"As well he should have been. No one has been able to say with any certainty what became of the man—of him and Helen, his wife. She had suffered a grievous injury and was being cared for at their house. One morning, she, Wally, and her nurse disappeared. Most of them did, anyway. There were… pieces of them left behind. Strictly speaking, there's no definite proof that Wally is dead—that any of them is. But it doesn't look good. The police were treating it as a probable multiple homicide."

"So Tyler Choate's some kind of crime boss, and your friend crossed him."

"That sounds as if it should be what occurred," Barry said. "I'm pretty sure it's the theory the cops are working from. From a distance—from what I've told you—it's the reasonable explanation. Wally's wife was injured in a barn that was connected to the Choates. This set him off in search of

information about them. He hired a private detective, a man named Lance Pride; he was the one who located Tyler Choate."

"Wait," Marissa said, "the guy's wife was hurt in a barn? What happened?"

Barry considered the latest tunnel that had opened before them. "A horse kicked her in the head. Split her skull open. A freak accident, but it left her with massive brain damage."

"Ouch. I guess that explains why he was so keen to get hold of whoever owned the barn."

"The horse kicked Wally, too—ruined his hip, left him unable to walk without a cane. That didn't matter as much as the wound to Helen, though."

"What became of the horse?"

"Delaney shot it."

"Oh."

"Anyway—what I started to say was, when I began to poke around into Wally and Helen's disappearance, into the weeks leading up to it, what appeared to be the reasonable explanation fell apart right away. For one thing, the Choates weren't your typical crime family. Almost the opposite, in fact. Pig farmers and super-scientists. I know, it sounds bizarre, but several of the men in the family had careers of some note. In physics, mostly. They also raised pigs on their property, to no great profit, from what I could determine. Members of the family came and went from view. Sometimes this was because they were visiting universities, research labs, think tanks, consulting on theoretical problems and their practical applications. I'll be honest: I couldn't tell you what the hell they were studying, and I flatter myself I'm intelligent. Some of the projects had to do with fairly exotic subatomic particles, which may explain Tyler's interest in this mine."

"You said he was in prison," Marissa said, "Tyler."

The air had warmed sufficiently for them to remove their ski masks, which Barry did, leaving tufts of his fine hair half-raised. "He is. I gather he was as gifted as the rest of the family, but chose a career in law enforcement, instead. Presumably, to allow him a safe vantage point from which to pursue his less-wholesome activities."

“He was the bad apple,” Marissa said. “The rest of the family was okay—weird, but okay—and he was into bad shit. Your friend messed with him, and Tyler had him taken care of. If he’s important enough, then him being in prison doesn’t matter. He wants to reach out and touch someone, he can do it.”

“All very rational,” Barry said, “except, there’s no evidence linking him to any larger criminal network, not even in rumor. He appears to be a model inmate; at least, his warden thinks so.”

Marissa pulled off her ski mask, stuffed it in her coat pocket. “Okay,” she said. “I want to say maybe the Choates are a dead-end, but we’re here, so I assume they’re not.”

They passed the entrance to a larger tunnel. “He called me,” Barry said. “Tyler Choate. Last week. I’ve spent a lot of time and treasure on this matter. I’ve investigated the Choates as extensively as did Wally. Hell, I succeeded in laying hands on the transcript of a cassette tape Lance Pride sent to Wally about a supposed visit he paid to Tyler Choate in his prison cell. It’s nonsense, but I read it half a dozen times. I’ve had Wally and Helen’s histories put under the microscope, too. I’ve stood in the room where the pieces of them were found. It’s been scrubbed clean, of course, but I swear, there is a feel to that space… It’s as if, when you notice the walls and ceiling out of the corners of your eyes, they aren’t meeting the way they should. But what other effect would you expect the site of such violence to have?

“The problem is, none of what I’ve found fits together. Despite my best efforts, I’ve been unable to arrange the information I’ve gathered into a coherent whole that will explain my friend’s fate. From what I understand, the police have encountered the same difficulty. I’ve kept on searching—it was what led me here, to Eckhard. I did my homework; I knew that the mine was tapped out decades ago. I suspect the consortium who’ve purchased it intend to set it up as some type of tax dodge. I don’t judge them; I’ve done the same thing, myself. What caused me to reach out to them was the fact that Tyler Choate had made use of the mine. In turn, this drew his attention to me.”

“What did he say?”

“He asked me if I was a student of mythology.”

The entrance to the next tunnel was smaller. “Mythology?”

“I said I’d read Bulfinch when I was younger, Edith Hamilton. Good, he said, I was familiar with the story of Ymir.”

“Ymir.”

“It’s part of the Norse creation myth. Ymir is a giant, inconceivably huge. The god, Odin, together with his brothers Vili and Vé, kills Ymir, then uses the pieces of his corpse to build the world. His skull becomes the sky, his blood the sea—you get the idea.”

“Lovely.”

“These are the Vikings we’re talking about. They weren’t famed for their refined sensibilities.”

“Okay—what does this have to do with anything?”

“Picture, Choate said, a being that size, vast enough that the inside of its skull could form the entire sky. How long did I suppose it would take for a creature that enormous to die? Eons as we measure time, even as our gods do. All the time Odin and his kin were carving up Ymir, tossing his brains up into the air to make the clouds, they were surrounded by his dying thoughts. When Ragnarok—their apocalypse—came, and everything went down in fire and ruin, it was only the last of those thoughts, coming to its end.”

“That’s pretty trippy,” Marissa said, “but I don’t—”

“Suppose,” Barry went on, “you could drill into that giant skull, through to whatever remained of its brain. A sublime trepanation, he called it. Wouldn’t you need a plane for that, I said, if we were inside the giant’s head? That was taking the myth too literally, Choate said. What it described was the fall of a being—the catastrophic fall, the Big Bang as the original murder—in whose remains all of us were resident. We—everything was living inside this dying titan. Our solar system was a bacterium subsisting on its cooling flesh. Quite a hopeless situation, he said, no less for him and his family. The Choates had scaled the evolutionary ladder, climbed so high above their fellow apes they could no longer see them below, but for all

that, they were little better than tapeworms gorging themselves in the loops of the giant's rotting intestines."

How many tunnels had they passed? All full of darkness that had a curiously flat quality, as if it had been painted on the rock face. Barry said, "There are points, however, where the tractability of the quantum foam might permit you to pierce the giant's forehead, to expose the surface of that great brain. You might stand at one end of an unbelievably long tunnel and watch thoughts light Ymir's cerebrum like chains of bursting suns. If you could decode those lights, who could say what you might learn?"

"All right," Marissa said, with sufficient force to interrupt Barry's reverie. "We've moved from trippy to batshit insane."

"I know, I know." Barry shook his head. "The man's voice… it was as refined, as precise, as an Oxford don's. It seemed to surround me. I wanted to ask him about Wally, say, How are you connected to my friend's death? But as long as he was speaking, I couldn't force the words out. They were trapped by Choate's voice. I had the sense that he knew exactly what my question was, but he never answered it. Instead, he invited me to meet him here, today. I agreed. I knew he was still in prison—and I double-checked, after the call ended—but I also knew I would keep our appointment. And," Barry opened his hands to take in the elevator, the surrounding rock, "here we are."

Half a dozen comments competed for Marissa to voice them, ranging from piteous ("Oh, Barry.") to scornful ("Seriously? This is why we drove to the ass-end of nowhere?"). All were choked off when movement to her left drew her eyes to that corner of the elevator, where she saw the same child who had stood in front of her on the ice road. Its eyes were wide, its mouth open.

VI

After her breathing had returned to normal, Marissa rose from the bed, pulled off the baseball cap and sunglasses Delaney had asked her to wear, and tugged on a t-shirt. Rather than returning to the king-sized bed, she settled in one of the chairs beside the small table that served as her personal bar. Most of the bottles ranged on it were down to a film tinting their glass

bottoms, but the Baileys sloshed when she hefted it by the neck, and that was fine. She wasn't certain Delaney was awake; she didn't bother checking before she started to speak.

"On the beach," she said, "earlier, I never finished what I was saying to you."

He mumbled what could have been, "Doesn't matter," his words already half a snore.

She swallowed a mouthful of Baileys. It had been a week since she had not been drunk. Each day's biggest challenge lay in consuming enough alcohol to maintain the pleasant version of the state, without tipping over into anger and self-pity. She said, "This one day, my convoy was caught in an ambush. Textbook example of how to spring one. There were eight of us, traveling west to one of the bases, there. I was third in line. The country was flat, which somehow registered in how big the sky felt. We stuck to the middle of the road, which ran through neighborhoods of squat, sand-colored houses, past palm trees and these big bushes whose name I couldn't remember. The ground was dry; the rigs pulled up rooster-tails of dust as they went. There wasn't any speed limit—well, none that we kept to. In front of some of the houses, groups of men in white robes and red headscarves watched us pass. A few of them threw rocks; although it was more the kids, teenagers and younger, who did that. They had a pretty good aim, too. I'd adjusted to the crack of a rock striking the windshield, the bang when it struck the door. We hadn't been driving that long when the guys ahead of me slowed, fast. Over the radio, I heard Grant, in the lead truck, say, '—in front of me,' and then the IED detonated.

"I saw the explosion, the jet of smoke; I heard the boom, like one of those big fireworks they set off towards the end of Fourth of July displays, the kind of sound you feel deep in your chest. It blew out Grant's windows, shredded his tires, tore the shit out of his engine. Probably concussed Grant, too; although, the insurgents shot him, so who knows? Everything came to a halt. I knew we'd been hit, and when the shooting started, I knew it wasn't over. After the bomb, the gun sounded almost tiny, like strings of firecrackers. I wasn't sure, but I thought we were being targeted from the windows of a couple of houses on either side of the street. Crossfire, right? Most of the fire concentrated on the first truck, but I heard McVey, who was

in the second truck, screaming that his windshield was full of holes, and he was pretty sure they'd hit his engine, too, because it was dead.

"Everyone was on the radio at the same time. Shea, the head driver, who was fifth in line, kept trying to raise Grant. 'Grant,' he said, 'move ahead.' Finally, McVey told him Grant was dead, and things weren't looking too good for him, either. 'All right,' Shea said, 'you're going to have to pull around him.' 'No can do,' McVey said, his rig was not moving. Shea couldn't—this was the guy who'd come off as such a badass the first time I met him. Now that the shit was burying the fan, he couldn't process what was happening. He must've told McVey to drive around Grant half a dozen times. McVey said he would love to, but his truck wouldn't move.

"The whole time, the insurgents kept firing, pop pop pop. A bullet punched through the top of my windshield. My AK was on the passenger's seat; I was waiting for Shea to tell us we were going to have to leave our trucks and take the fight to our attackers. At the very least, I was expecting him to direct us to rescue McVey. Because it would have to be us. Someone had radioed the Army for assistance—it must have been Shea—and the woman on the other end told him to wait for an answer that still hadn't come. My heart had shrunk somewhere deep down in my gut. The base of my throat hurt. I was wearing the flak jacket and helmet the company had issued us, but I didn't rate its chances of stopping a bullet from an AK too high. Any minute, I expected the insurgents to leave their windows, or start targeting the rest of us. But all they did was empty magazine after magazine into Grant and McVey's rigs. McVey had gone from demanding help to repeating this kind of prayer, 'Jesus, Jesus Christ, oh Jesus, save me, Jesus Christ.' There was room to the right of his truck, maybe enough for me to squeeze through. I thought I might be able to roll up beside him, use my truck as a shield to let him escape from his and climb in beside me. I could picture myself doing this, but I couldn't do anything to make it happen. My left hand was on the wheel, my right was on the gearshift; my left foot had the clutch pressed in, my right was over the gas—and I sat where I was. Shea was speaking to me, had caught up with the situation and was saying I had to pull around McVey and lead the group out of there. I didn't."

Her throat was dry. She took a generous pull on the bottle. "They had started kidnapping contractors, the insurgents. They were posting videos to

YouTube of these guys sitting cross-legged on the floor, their hands tied behind their backs, surrounded by men in black ski masks. All of them denounced the occupation, a few made requests for ransoms. One guy was murdered, there, on camera, his throat slashed and his head cut off while he was dying. Afterwards, the murdering fuck who'd done it held up the poor guy's head like it was some kind of trophy. There was this expression on the dead man's face… I don't know how to describe it. He looked sick, as if he'd been choking on his own death. I want to say that this was what was keeping me from moving. Maybe it was. Shea was telling me to put the truck in gear and step on the gas. McVey was crying, 'Jesus,' over and over again. My nostrils were full of the burnt stink of gunpowder. The insurgents' guns rattled on, blowing out another of McVey's tires. 'Move,' Shea was saying. I couldn't believe how level his voice was. 'You have to move.'

"Then I was. I can't say what happened. One moment, I was paralyzed; the next, I had the truck in first and was spinning the wheel to the right. It was a tight fit between McVey's truck and a couple of those heavy bushes, but I cleared it. Bullets smacked the passenger door. One punched through and drilled the seat beside me. I didn't slow beside McVey's cab. I didn't look over at it, or at Grant's rig, still burning. I focused on the road before me, and that allowed me to see the child standing in the middle of it in plenty of time. I couldn't say if it was a boy or a girl. It was young—six, seven—dressed in rags. Barefoot. I thought about Grant's sudden stop. There had been reports of insurgents putting children in the way of approaching convoys and, when the trucks slowed, hitting them. I hadn't believed the stories—hadn't wanted to—but it appeared that was precisely what had occurred, here.

"Passing Grant's truck, I steered left, in an effort to avoid the remains of the IED scattered across the road. This set me straight towards the child. I wanted to turn right, but I had to wait for the truck's back wheels to clear the bomb wreckage, and by the time they did, I was already too close. I pulled the wheel around, anyway, shouting at the kid to get out of the way, but even if it had heard me over the roar of the engine and the popping of the guns, I doubt it understood English. It stood there, its eyes wide, its mouth open, its arms hanging at its sides. I could have stomped the brake

and done what I could to miss the child, but I didn't. It was like, now that I had put myself in motion, I wasn't about to stop.

"There should have been no way for me to feel the truck striking something that small. Yet I'm positive a slight tremor ran though the steering wheel as I sped past the place where the child was standing. I didn't check my mirrors for anything lying in the road.

"Later, after we'd pulled into our destination and were sitting around the mess hall, I asked Shea if he'd noticed a child's body a little way past Grant's truck. Yeah, he said, he'd seen a body there that must have been a kid's. Motherfuckers must have stationed it there to stop Grant, then, when they set off the IED, it was killed in the blast. 'Savages,' he said. 'Motherfucking savages.' I said nothing to contradict his version of events."

The bottle of Baileys was empty. Marissa turned it in her hands. She thought Delaney was asleep, but she wasn't certain. She sat where she was, and did not say anything else.

VII

With a shuddering clash, the elevator came to a halt.

"End of the line," Barry said, and slid back the door.

The child was still in the car, its expression of horror unchanged.

Barry stepped out into darkness. For a moment, Marissa was alone in the car with the child. *Not real*, she thought. *"It's not real. There is nothing standing there.* Then the tunnel at whose end they had arrived filled with pale, flickering light as Barry flipped the switch that turned on the fluorescent lights set in its ceiling. "It's this way," he said and, without waiting for her, set off.

Pulse thudding, she fled the elevator, rushing ahead of Barry. She swallowed, said, "You should let me go first."

He grunted.

To give her hands something to do, she unsnapped the row of buttons fastening her jacket over top of its zipper, pinched the zipper's tongue, and eased it down far enough at allow her access to her pistol in its shoulder-holster. She considered tugging off her mittens, but decided that the air,

while warmer than it was at the surface, was not that warm. Although she could sense the child at her back, she did not turn her heard. Instead, she said, “This Wallace—you guys must have been pretty close.”

“Oh?” Barry said. “What makes you say that?”

The tunnel was surprisingly finished, its floor and rounded walls concrete. The lights buzzed. “Well,” she said, “I mean, here we are, right? I’d have to check the odometer for the exact mileage, but we’ve come pretty far. Not to mention, all the other stuff you’ve been up to. You don’t do that for just anyone.”

“I suppose not,” Barry said, though the tone of his voice was threaded with doubt. “Wally was a friend, of course. We certainly drank enough of one another’s Scotch. There wasn’t a function amongst our set that the two of us didn’t attend, and exchange a few words at. He’d traveled quite a bit, and if we were stuck for conversation, we would compare notes on Finland, or Egypt, or Mongolia. We were forever going to do something together, plan a return trip to one of those countries, take our wives someplace new. We got along all right. I had the sense that, wherever we went, we’d have a fine time, together.”

The tunnel curved to the left. Marissa wondered how far down the pit—or beneath it—their ride had taken them. She did not look behind her.

“I’m sorry,” Barry said. “‘A fine time together:’ sounds like something out of bloody F. Scott Fitzgerald, doesn’t it? Chin chin, old boy, jolly good. Or maybe Wodehouse. The fact is, we weren’t especially close. After he died—disappeared, but who is anyone kidding?—afterwards, I was waiting for one of Wally’s other friends, the fellows I considered his close friends, Skip Arden or Randy Freeman, to step forward, keep up with the police investigation, ensure that everything that could be done was being done to locate whoever was responsible and bring them to account. No one took that step—Skip and Randy seemed to have fallen off the face of the earth—so eventually, I did. I picked up the phone and dialed the police because I could, because it was necessary that someone should do so and I was available. You could call it loyalty, I suppose. It’s difficult to speak about without sounding ridiculous to yourself.”

“It’s okay,” Marissa said, “I understand loyalty.”

In front of her, the tunnel dead-ended in a concrete wall in which a flat, gray metal door was centered. Marissa said, “Through here?”

“I assume so.”

She pulled off her right mitten and reached inside her coat for the pistol. She withdrew it from its holster, and let it hang muzzle-down in her hand as she approached the door.

“What is it?” Barry said.

“Just being cautious.”

A simple doorknob swung the door in. A wave of warm, humid air spilled over her. A rough, unlit corridor stretched maybe fifty feet to a doorway full of soft, yellow light.

“Well?” Barry said.

Before she could answer, the silhouette of an enormous man occulted the doorway. Marissa raised the .38. Mouth dry, she called, “Hello?”

The voice that answered made her want to scream. “Is that Barret Langan?” it called.

“It is,” Barry said. “Is that Tyler Choate?”

“The very same,” the voice said. “And you brought a little friend.”

“Ms. Osterhoudt sees to my well-being,” Barry said. “I’m sure you have employees who do the same for you.”

“Not employees, no,” Tyler Choate said. “I prefer to think of them as associates, fellow-travelers who have not progressed as far along the particular road we walk. Nonetheless, your point is taken. I would consider it a favor, though, if she would lower her pistol. Good manners, you know.”

“Go ahead,” Barry said, “but keep it handy.”

Whatever rock the corridor had been carved from was full of tiny crystals that caught the lights shining at either end of the passageway and glowed like stars. Some peculiarity of the walls’ contours leant the crystals the impression of depth, so that, in walking the passageway, Marissa had the impression of crossing a bridge spanning the stars. The sensation received a boost when she noticed that certain groupings of the lights seemed to align into patterns, constellations; albeit, none of them familiar. She could not

hear her boots scraping the floor. She glanced down, and saw a ball of light streak from left to right, apparently far below her. *Shooting star*, she thought, then, *That's ridiculous*. All the same, the relief that suffused her on reaching the other end of the corridor—from which Tyler Choate had withdrawn—was palpable.

She stepped out onto a white marble floor. Directly in front of her, plush leather seats ringed the base of a sizable marble column. A newspaper lay folded on one of them. A mural whose brightly costumed figures suggested Renaissance Italy decorated the walls before and to either side of her. On her right, a rectangle of black marble, set lengthwise, formed a counter atop which sat a gold pen in a polished wood holder and a small crystal bowl full of candies in gold wrappers. The entire space was suffused with the buttery glow of the sun descending the sky, which appeared to originate from the wall in which the doorway was set. Marissa leaned forward, and saw rows of tall windows bracketing the entrance, each one brimming with daylight. "What the fuck?"

Barry had followed her into the room. "Why," he said, "this is the Broadsword. What are we doing here?"

"This is the Broadsword," Tyler Choate said. He was standing to the right of the marble column. How, Marissa thought, could she possibly have missed him? The man was a giant, easily eight feet tall, five hundred pounds at minimum. A sleeveless white robe draped him to the tops of his thighs; the garment looked to be a sheet in whose center a hole had been cut for Choate's outsized head. An assortment of astronomical symbols—stylized suns, moons, stars, planets, comets—had been written on the material in what appeared to be black magic marker. The body under the robe was exaggerated, swollen with muscles traversed by rigid veins. Nor was the face any better, the almost-delicate features situated in an expanse of flesh bordered by glossy black hair that draped Choate's shoulders. What Marissa took to be a white dunce cap rose from his head—a wizard's hat, she realized, to match the robe. A single symbol was inscribed on its front, a circle, its circumference broken at about the three o'clock mark.

There was no way for Marissa to have missed him, and yet, she had. It was as if he'd stepped out from behind the creamy light. His voice something

with too many legs skittering over her, he said, “To be precise, this is Olympia’s famous hotel as it was mid-afternoon on March 5, 1927.”

“It’s an excellent reproduction,” Barry said. “I could almost believe I’m standing in the Broadsword at that exact moment.”

“You are,” Choate said, “although, the moment has been sliced from its context and slotted here.”

Wonderful, Marissa thought, *guy thinks he’s a supervillain. Must be all the steroids he took to get this big*.

“Why?” Barry said.

“My father was very fond of the Broadsword,” Choate said. “His father took him to dine at it when he was a boy, and he retained a lifelong affection for the establishment. Call this an act of filial piety.”

“All right,” Barry said. “Why are we meeting you here? What does this location have to do with what happened to Wallace and Helen Smith?”

“Truthfully, not much,” Choate said, “although, given its association with my father, it is not completely inappropriate.”

“Wallace ran afoul of your father?” Barry said.

“Father developed an unusually… *intimate* relationship with Helen Smith,” Choate said. “In the end it tore her—and her husband—apart.” He grinned at the obvious pun.

“I was hoping for a more detailed explanation,” Barry said.

“He split her head open,” Choate said. “He crushed her husband between his teeth. Is that detailed enough for you?”

“Where is he, now?”

Choate waved his enormous hands to take in the surrounding luxury. “Father was much further along in his development than either me or my brother, Joshua. While he could still appreciate the immediate pleasures of your friend and his wife, his form had become more subtle in nature. It was an ideal substance for the process I described to you in our chat. You remember: the sublime trepanation.”

“Drilling a hole in the skull of a dead god,” Barry said.

“It’s a metaphor, of course; except, it’s also true. You can imagine, an enterprise of this magnitude requires unprecedented tools. Together, my brother and I were able to fashion such a device from our sire’s form.”

Great, Marissa thought. *We’re in the underground lair of a crazy, giant sex-offender who, from the sound of it, is also a patricide. And who knows? He’s probably a cannibal, too*.

As if reading her mind, Barry said, “You killed him? Your father?”

A look of almost comic frustration twisted Choate’s features. “Come in,” he said, beckoning them toward him. “Come in, and have a look out the windows.”

Marissa glanced back at Barry. He nodded. She advanced three steps across the floor, and half-turned to view the wall in which the door opened. There were seven to eight windows to either side of the entrance. Tall, wide, arched at the top, they shone as if their very glass had been ground from light. It was a good trick, but not nearly as good as what she saw through the shining panes. A cratered plane of black sand stretched away to blackness. The sky was black, too, with the exception of a scattering of stars, several of them much larger and brighter than any she knew from the night sky. While she watched, one of the stars swelled, two, three times its diameter, more, before contracting to half its original size, then bursting in a phosphorous-flare that jerked her hand in front of her eyes. “Jesus!” she shouted. Behind and to her left, she heard Barry murmur, “Fuck!” Vision bleached, lids fluttering, she pivoted towards Choate. If he wanted to make a move, now was the time. She raised the .38 in his general direction.

Someone was standing next to him, equally tall, wearing a plain robe whose hood had been raised. *This must be the brother*, she thought, *Joshua*. When he lifted his hands and drew back the hood, she saw that she was right; although this sibling seemed much thinner, the skin shrunken around the contours of his enlarged skull. “Can you see anything?” Barry said. She could. She could see Joshua Choate reach his right hand into the left sleeve of his robe and withdraw a knife that was more a machete, a sinister bit of slight-of-hand. He exchanged a nod with his brother, and started towards her and Barry.

Marissa shot him five times, centering on his chest and tracking up to his head. The first two shots cracked the air and puckered the tops of Joshua's robe. The third shot rung in Marissa's ears like a hammer striking an actual bell; she didn't hear the fourth and fifth shots, only felt the revolver buck in her hand. Holes opened in Joshua's throat, his right cheek, his forehead. His knife bounced on the marble floor where he dropped it; he collapsed next to it and did not move. Marissa swung the gun at Tyler Choate, who had not strayed from his position. His lips were moving, but whatever words were leaving them were kept from her by the ringing in her ears. She shook her head. "I can't hear you."

Tyler nodded, held up one paw with all five fingers extended.

"That leaves me one," she said, "and I'm betting I can put it someplace that will hurt."

A hand pressed her shoulder: Barry, his cell phone out in his other hand. She did not need to hear what he was saying to know the threat in it.

Choate, however, grinned and gestured at the windows with their special-effects scene. Marissa looked at Barry, who was frowning at his phone. Were they too deep underground? Speaking in the too-loud voice of someone whose hearing was still stunned, Barry uttered a retort that was on the verge of being audible. Marissa thought he was accusing Choate and his brother of luring him here to murder him, to put an end to his investigation into Wallace and Helen Smith's deaths.

That she could see, Choate did nothing. But the roof, the walls, the furniture of the room in which they were standing flew off in different directions, as if yanked away on enormous strings. Now nothing separated them from the desolate plane she had viewed through the windows. In the blackness overhead, a trio of stars flashed one-two-three, strobing the black sand with silent light. Joshua Choate lay where he had fallen; though his knife had been swept away in the disassembling of the room. Tyler Choate also remained in place. Marissa had the impression of something vast looming in the dark landscape behind him, a great, tumorous mass to which he was tethered by a fine thread that floated up from the back of his head and corkscrewed over what she judged a considerable distance.

This time, when Choate spoke, it was as if he was whispering in her ear. “You?” he said. “Barry, my friend, you’re incidental. Your companion is the reason you’re here.”

It was perhaps more shocking than anything Marissa had witnessed. “Me?”

“I required someone to kill my brother.” He tilted his head at Joshua’s remains.

His words still half-shouted, Barry said, “What?”

“This was a hit?” Marissa said. The notion was laughable, completely out-of-keeping with the madness surrounding them.

“A sacrifice,” Choate said, “of himself to himself. Like Odin on Yggdrasil’s branch. The only way out of this festering cosmos, this heaving meatwheel. My brother underwent a *kenosis*, an emptying; he divested himself of all he had become. He learned, you understand. From the vantage point we established, here, my brother taught himself to decipher Ymir’s dying thoughts. Spelled out in a language of dying suns, he found the key that unlocked the exit to this cadaver universe. That key was nothing, the place that is not a place, the state that is not a state. There, where all things are equally non-existent, he would have parity with Ymir, and might discover what the ancients called the *Ginnungagap*, the breach that birthed the giant.

“Funny,” Choate said, “it all sounds rather Eastern, doesn’t it? The renunciation of everything and all that. I had always dismissed such notions as so much hippie nonsense. According to my brother, though, those fellows were onto something.

“I helped him to expunge the more… developed aspects of his self. But when it came to helping him out of that most fundamental encumbrance, his life, I could not bring myself to offer him that assistance.” Choate smiled tightly. “I will admit, of the multitude of vices I might have numbered amongst my practice, sentimentality, family-feeling, would not have been one of them. Well. I could not take my brother’s life; any more, I suspect, than Joshua could have taken mine. I searched for a suitable vehicle to deliver my brother’s death to him. You may imagine, I have a substantial list of potential names. By this time, however, Barret’s interest in me and mine had drawn my attention, and after I conducted an inquiry into him, I

discovered Ms. Osterhoudt in his employ. Further research into the particulars of her history convinced me that she was the person for the job. It seems I was correct."

"All right," Barry said, "all right." The words quivered with strain. "We've done what you brought us here for. It's time for us to go."

The great, dark shape behind Tyler Choate rushed forward, as if the distance between it and him had collapsed. His body rippled, the skin tearing up and down his arms and legs. His mouth split at the corners, widening across his considerable face. Curved teeth that would have been at home in a tiger's jaws burst from his gums. A hellish light ignited within his eyes. "Go?" he said, and the single syllable contained a brief monologue's worth of sinister statements. *My brother may have believed in renunciation, but as far as I'm concerned, the jury's still out. He may have wanted it, but you killed my brother. We haven't had anything to eat, and I'm* starving. Blood streamed from his body, steaming with whatever energy was burning through it. He stepped towards them.

Would the single bullet remaining in her pistol be any use against whatever vision of raw appetite Tyler Choate was becoming? Even allowing for a miraculous shot to the eye or forehead, she doubted it. She raised the pistol, turned, and shot Barry in the head. His expression blank, he fell dead. She tossed the gun down beside him.

Choate's face was mostly a gaping maw; the look on what was visible of the rest of it was unreadable. Marissa said, "Loyalty."

He gave a wet, barking cough she realized was a laugh.

"Fuck you," she said.

And he was gone. In his place was the child, the one who had traveled with her in the elevator, the one who had been standing on the ice in front of the Hummer, the one whose death she had felt tremble the steering wheel of her truck. Its mouth was open, alight with unearthly fire.

"You," she said. "Okay. I'm ready for this. Okay. Let's go. I'm ready."

As it turned out, she was not.

Kore

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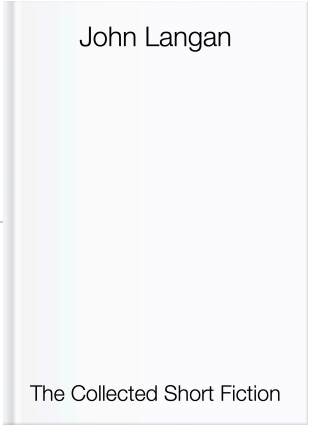


Annie, my wife, started the Halloween Walk when our son was three. We were renting a house on a quiet street. She'd learned that several of the kids in his preschool didn't go trick-or-treating because their neighborhoods weren't safe enough for their parents to take them out in. "We could do something, here," she said to me. "We could make a haunted walk for the kids behind the house." I agreed. Every kid should experience Halloween, right? Together, we set up a course for the kids that took them through the passage between the house and its garage, up the hill behind the garage, and along the terrace cut into the hill. We strung the cottony spider-webs we'd bought at Wal-Mart around the back passage, then populated them with our son's collection of rubber spiders; for a finishing touch, we hung his enormous tarantula puppet in the center of the alley, and told the kids they had to duck under it. We filled yellow dish-gloves with bubble wrap, dabbed streaks of red paint along the fingers, and jammed them into the wire fence that extended beyond the end of the garage. The paint dried pink, but the effect was more surreal than ludicrous. "Don't get caught by the hands of the dead," we said to the kids. At the other end of the terrace, on a white plastic chair, we sat the dummy we'd made from filling an old pair of my jeans and one of my old shirts with straw and tying the ends of the arms and legs closed. I had fashioned its head by turning a gallon milk-jug upside down and painting a green-skinned face on it. I'd given it large, baleful eyes. Annie placed half a watermelon that had slid past ripeness on the ground in front of the dummy, and jammed a dozen keys she'd bought at the dollar store into the liquescent fruit. This, we told the kids, was Frankenstein's monster. He was asleep, but might wake at any moment. His old, used-up brain was lying at his feet. Each of the kids had to poke around in his rotten gray matter until they found a key, which they had to extract without disturbing him. Once everyone had a key, they had to run as fast as they could to the front of the house. There, Annie was waiting on the porch

in an old-fashioned witch's costume (although the pointed hat was bright orange, its brim composed of netting). Each kid presented their key, which she inspected, then instructed them to drop into the plastic kettle before her. In exchange, the child received a brown paper lunch-bag decorated with spiders and skulls, and full of candy. After the last bag had been distributed, we escorted the kids up and down our street, where the trick-or-treating was plentiful and safe.

So big a hit was our first Halloween Walk that it became an instant tradition. A few years later, when we left that rental house to move to one we'd bought, there was a single question on the lips of our son's friends: "Are you still going to have Halloween in your new house?" Of course, we said. While smaller than our previous place, this house had a large, dry, mostly-empty basement. It was, Annie declared, the perfect place for the Walk. Once the sun had slid from the sky, I gathered our son and his friends at the back of the house, where the ground sloped steeply down, exposing the northeast corner of the basement and the door set there. Addressing the kids in the big, over-the-top voice of a circus ringmaster, I described what lay in store for them within. One year, it was Dr. Frankenstein's laboratory. Another, it was the halls in which Dr. Moreau kept his worst experiments confined. A third time, it was the caverns under Count Dracula's (supposedly) abandoned castle. As with that first Walk, each journey presented a goal for the kids to accomplish. They had to steal the batteries Dr. Frankenstein intended to power his next monstrous creation. They had to rescue the (stuffed) animals slated for Dr. Moreau's forthcoming round of vivisection. They had to locate and retrieve the magic rings that would permit Dracula to be resurrected. Flashlight in hand, I led them counter-clockwise around the basement, directing the light at mason jars stuffed with rubber eyeballs, at buckets brimming with plastic snakes, at cryptic graffiti on the cement walls. Our destination was always the same: the small room off the southeast corner of the basement. When the real estate agent had shown us the house, she had described the space as a sauna. There was an improvised metal basket full of large, round stones across from the door, so it seemed possible the room had been used for steam. But the open drain in the center of the floor had looked wider than what you would have expected in a sauna. It was deep, too, beyond the range of the flashlight we

shone into it. Some kind of drywell, we decided, and covered it with a square of plywood. As I led the kids into the room, I positioned myself at the cover, to keep them clear of it. After the group had fulfilled its annual task, I sent the kids upstairs, where Annie, in some variation of a witch's costume (but always with that orange hat), was waiting for them with bags of candy.

This past Halloween was our most elaborate, yet. We had settled on an archaeological theme, Indiana Jones meets the Mummy, so to speak. There was a big bag of sand left over from one of the aquariums; we scattered it over the floor. We placed plastic snakes, rubber spiders and scorpions, around the room. I chalked the most sinister hieroglyphs I could find online onto the basement walls. A friend provided us with a six-foot cardboard box that I spray painted gold then hand painted a pharaoh's mannered features onto. We propped our handmade sarcophagus against one side of the sauna and strewed plastic human bones about the floor. For the first time, I incorporated the drywell into the night's events, removing the cover and filling the floor surrounding it with more malevolent sigils. Also for the first time, Annie took a more active role in the actual Walk. About a month before Halloween, we had attended a birthday party for one of our son's friends. The party had had a classical mythology theme, and had climaxed with the gathered party-goers taking turns smashing a huge piñata in the shape of Medusa's head. The rubber snakes with which the piñata was adorned flew off during the attempts to open it, but the head itself was largely intact, and Annie, already thinking ahead, had asked our hosts if she could take it home. "What for?" I'd asked. "You'll see," she'd answered. By trimming the ragged opening at the base of the neck, she transformed it into an oversized mask. She added a pair of long, gray gloves and a pale green gown she'd picked up at the Salvation Army, and *voilà*, she was a goddess. "Which goddess?" I said. "That's not important," she said. Her plan was to sit in the corner of the sauna opposite the sarcophagus. The kids would see the mask and assume it was just another prop; when she stood, it would scare the bejeezus out of them. "What if we use the drywell?" I said. "What if the kids have to throw something into it in order to propitiate you?" "Not me," she said, "the goddess." But we agreed that I would give

them each a piece of bite-sized candy that they would have to drop into the well to appease the goddess.

By and large, the Halloween Walk went well. I was concerned that our son and his friends, all of whom are around eleven, might be too old for another Walk, that our props might be too amateurish for them, but both our son and a couple of his friends bought into the scenario with real gusto, which helped to sell it to the rest of the kids. Even the boy who kept insisting that he wasn't afraid of any of this, it was all so *fake*, was looking fairly unsettled. And when I had them gathered in the sauna, which I re-christened the Chamber of Souls, and Annie slowly rose from her seat, the kids gave a collective gasp. "It's Robbie's mom," someone whispered. "Is it?" someone else replied. Playing along, our son said, "That doesn't look like my mom." "She's in a costume—duh!" the first kid hissed. "My mom's upstairs," our son said, managing to sound genuinely nervous. For all its simplicity, I suppose the costume was effective—maybe because of its simplicity. The face on the oversized head was stylized, more department-store mannequin than classical portrait. Its blank eyes were too large for the other features, the narrow, almost pointed nose, the pouting lips. The left cheek was wrinkled, a memento of its previous existence as a piñata. Annie held her head at such an angle that those empty eyes seemed to stare at a point directly above the kids' heads. "Oh Ancient Power," I said, "we bring offerings for your honor. Accept them, and do not drag us down to the darkness where you reign." Considering it was improvised pretty much on the spot, I thought my supplication sounded pretty good. Two and three at a time, the kids darted forward and flung the pieces of candy I gave them into the drywell. A couple of the girls shrieked as they did. The resident skeptic tossed his Hershey's Kiss into the hole with a motion that was probably intended to be dismissive but that came across as full of dread. (I'll admit, I was more pleased by that than I should have been.)

The only part of the Walk that didn't go according to plan involved the younger brother of one of son's friends. He was seven, and a particularly wide-eyed and tremulous seven at that. I wasn't sure that the Walk would be appropriate for him, but he insisted with all of a younger brother's desire not to be left out of his older brother's fun that he wanted to take part in it. His mother offered to accompany us, which I thought would reassure him

should he find anything too intense. For most of the Walk, I was right. While I elaborated the terrible history of the latest stop on our tour, I heard the boy's mother murmuring to him, and while his eyes retained their shocked expression, he appeared to be tolerating the event. However, when it came his turn to step out and add his candy to those already cast into the drywell, he refused. "Come on," his mother said lightly, "it's no big deal." The boy shook his head violently. In fact, his entire body was trembling, as if he were freezing. "Come on," his mother said, "it's just Ms. Annie." That loosened his tongue. Through chattering teeth, he said, "How do you know?" "What do you mean?" his mother said. "How do you *know*?" he said. "*How do you know?*" I half-expected Annie to remove her mask, show the boy that his mother was right, it was only her, but she remained still. "*How do you know?*" the boy said over his mother's calm insistence that this was all a game, we were just playing, it was Halloween and that was Ms. Annie in her costume. "*How do you know?*" Finally, I stepped in and announced that it was time for the kids to go upstairs, to receive their bags of candy. I herded my son and his friends to the staircase, cautioning them to watch their steps. As soon as my son opened the door to the kitchen, lighting the stairs, I turned back towards the sauna. But the younger boy and his mom were already on their way out of it, and although his eyes were still wet with tears, he appeared more embarrassed than frightened. Nonetheless, I stopped to talk with his mom, who assured me her son was fine. "Your wife," she said, "is some actress. She had me creeped out." "Me too," I laughed. I ducked my head into the sauna to check for Annie, but she had already left, exiting the basement door to circle around the front of the house and in the front door. By the time I climbed to the kitchen door, she was in the midst of the kids, dressed in her usual witch's costume, this one consisting of a plain black dress the ends of whose sleeves and skirt had been pre-cut to appear ragged, a heavy necklace, and the orange hat. I wound my way through the kids to where she was pouring cups of apple cider and kissed her on the back of the neck. "You are something," I said. "You have no idea," she said, and passed me a cup to hand to one of our son's friends.

It's strange how quickly such an event recedes into your memory. Not until a month later, the weekend after Thanksgiving, did I think about it again in

any kind of detail. It was late Saturday night—early Sunday morning, technically. I clawed my way out of the thick folds of a sleep that had wrapped around me like a blanket. I wasn't certain what had awakened me. To be honest, I had the sense that it was because I'd been so profoundly asleep that I'd woken, as if my body had dragged me back into myself from some other state. There was something different about the house. It was like when the power goes out while you've been asleep and you wake to the air colder, the chorus of noises that fills the nighttime hours silent. I glanced to my left, but Annie's side of the bed was empty. Was that what I'd registered, her rising to visit the bathroom? I listened for the sound of her moving downstairs but didn't hear anything. Of course, she might have retreated to the guest room futon to escape my snoring. Only when I was rolling over to return to sleep did I register the figure standing in the corner of the room, to the right of the door. Instantly, I was sitting upright, my heart hammering as if I'd been doused with a bucket of freezing water. The shadows were particularly thick where the form was, away from the windows, but I could make out the oversized head, the dress. I opened my mouth to say, "Honey?" but stopped, overwhelmed by the certainty that, whoever was in the room with me, it was not Annie. For what couldn't have been as long as it seemed, the figure stood in place, its head tilted towards me, while I sat where I was, that little boy's question looping in my mind ("*How do you know?*"). The darkness seemed grainier in that part of the room, as if the air were different, somehow; I had the impression of tremendous distance and age. At last, the figure turned to its right and walked out the door. I waited for the stairs to the living room to utter their creaks and groans, but they remained mute. There was nothing I wanted to do less than leave the bed to see what had become of the intruder. But my son was asleep in his room, and my wife was somewhere else in the house. With as much stealth as I could muster, I slid out from between the sheets and padded to the door, regretting that I'd never gotten around to hiding that baseball bat under the bed. The landing outside the room was empty. My son's door was shut. I opened it, anyway, to check on him, but he was soundly asleep, unaccompanied by any weird visitors. Could the figure have descended the staircase in silence? It seemed unlikely, yet appeared the only possibility. I followed it down, my heavy footsteps announcing my passage. The first floor was empty of both the intruder and Annie. At this, I felt a momentary

surge of panic, and, sliding one of the long knives from the butcher block beside the coffee maker, headed for the basement stairs.

I found Annie in the sauna, crouched over the drywell. She was naked, her hair hanging down around her face. She'd preserved the hieroglyphs I'd drawn on the floor around the hole, and added a few of her own. In her right hand, she held an assortment of candies. With her left, she was picking them up one at a time and casting them into the well. I set the knife on the floor beside the door and walked toward her. I didn't know what to say. Without looking up, without speaking, she held out a candy to me. I took it. It was a bite-sized Charleston Chew. I'd lost a tooth to one of these when I was a kid. The tooth had been loose but not that loose, and had torn free of the gum with a sweet, sharp pain that had flooded my mouth with the taste of blood and sugar. I gazed at the drywell, at the circle of blackness that dropped who knew how far to who knew what destination. "You have no idea," Annie had said to me Halloween night. I didn't. I tossed my offering into the darkness, and reached to my wife for the next one.

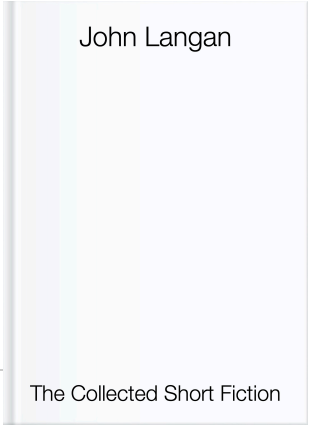
Les Mysteres du Ver

First published in *The Starry Wisdom Library: The Catalogue of the Greatest Occult Book Auction of All Time* (December 2014)

Not yet available in this collection.

The Horn of the World's Ending

First published in *That is not Dead* (February 2015)
Also published in *Children of the Fang and Other Genealogies* (August 2020)



Judaea, Second Century AD:

I

The young officer knew his Homer. He knew Virgil too. More importantly, he had read Herodotus and so from epic and history learned that the gods sometimes walked among men. When he imagined himself encountering a god, it was usually in the thick of battle. He would be on horseback, slashing right and left with his sword, and a flash of metal would draw his eye to a tall man in shining armor whose sword was cutting a bloody arc through the foes around him. Mars would pause in his gory work long enough to nod his approval at the officer, and then the battle would separate them. Brief as he pictured it, that gesture would cling to him, lighting his way along a magnificent career. The opportunity to position himself closer to that (possible) encounter had led the young officer to request duty here in Judaea, where a surprisingly successful revolt had led to the defeat of a legion and the proclamation of an independent Jewish kingdom. In response, the emperor had summoned the governor of Britannia, Sextus Julius Severus, to command the army that would reestablish imperial control of the province. To that end, Severus had called on a full half-dozen legions and supplemented them with elements drawn from another half dozen, including the young officer. Having found himself part of an enterprise so vast, the young man’s pride had swelled, and he had felt sure that the weeks and months ahead would bring him the meeting for which he yearned.

What he had met thus far, however, had more in common with the life of the farmer than it did that of the soldier. At least that was the comparison

his commanding officer had made. Old Lucian had left a considerable farm in southern Gaul to be part of this force, and he tended to treat that occupation as the measure by which all other things might be described. Judaea, Lucian had said to his junior officers, was like a field that had been neglected so that weeds had taken root in the soil and wild animals had claimed it for their territory. If you did not want to cede your land to such things, the only remedy was fire and the blade. You must burn the weeds, and you must kill the animals. The young officer was not certain how sound his superior's views were when it came to agriculture. His own family had been scholars and wine merchants. Applied metaphorically, Lucian's view entailed razing smaller settlements, setting the torch to whatever would take its flame, and cutting down anyone who did not flee quickly enough. He had no moral objection to his prescribed course of action. These people had not been Roman to begin with—worse, they were actively hostile to the empire. Whatever fate was theirs, their actions had purchased it. Rather, his objection was aesthetic. Burning fields, slaughtering livestock, pillaging then knocking down dwellings, killing those who put themselves close enough for it—none of it was especially heroic or glorious. Elsewhere, to the north and east, there was fighting. He had heard accounts of battles between elements of other legions and Judaean forces—fierce contests whose victors could feel well satisfied. It was in such clashes as these, and not in the slaughter of sheep, that one might hope to see and be seen by a god. His lack of satisfaction with the action he directed was matched by his unhappiness with the place to which he'd come, the people who inhabited it. Granted, no place could match Rome, but this country seemed almost exactly its opposite: what greenery there was hemmed in by arid land; the trees little better than bushes; the buildings only a few steps up from hovels. The men wore thick beards; the women, dull robes. Few, if any, would or could speak Greek. It hardly seemed a place worth contesting.

Old Lucian had warned his junior officers to be careful of traveling anywhere alone, especially in the larger towns and cities. The Judaean troops had carried off raids astounding in their brazenness, helped in no small part by a civilian populace ready to aid and abet them in ways large and small. Stroll through a market by yourself and you were likely to find yourself distracted by the merchant who spilled his wares in front of you so

that a Judaean soldier could slip up behind you and treat your armpit to his dagger. The young officer did not doubt the caution; indeed, it was his very belief in it that had brought him to this inn outside Bethlehem. Walking through the front door, his cloak swept back so that his armor and his sword were plain to see, and demanding seating and wine was his best chance to put himself in harm's way. He did not object when the innkeeper placed him in the center of the large dining room. He took in the drinkers and diners around him with a level gaze that he meant as a challenge and a caution. Nobody looked immediately threatening, which was to say, everybody did. He loosened his helmet, set it on the rough table in front of him, and waited for his wine.

He had his first cup to his lips when the two men seated to his right stood up. Heart surging, he threw down the cup and sprang to his feet, kicking back his chair and drawing his sword. The men put up their hands—reaching for weapons, he guessed. Already, he was moving to stab the one to the right, who was closer and whom he could turn to use as a shield against his friend. But the men were not producing daggers; they were holding their hands over their heads and scrambling back from his lunge. Afraid that this might be a feint, he spun, his sword out before him, the light quivering up its blade. The rest of the patrons were frozen, their eyes wide. He covered the room again, more slowly this time, pretending that the flush he could feel climbing his cheeks was a result of his sudden movement.

Later, after he had returned his sword to its sheath, the mess had been cleared up, and he had resumed his seat, the young officer would wonder how it was that he had surveyed the room thrice and not taken notice of the man seated in front of him, in the corner to his left. He might have been the oldest in the room, though it was difficult to be certain, since he was clean-shaven and wore his hair stubble-short. The eye patch covering his right eye drew attention but was hardly unique, while his robes were remarkable only for their wear. Where the man's table was, the room was noticeably darker—almost more so than it should have been—and the man seemed *dim*, of a piece with the shadows gathered there. It was as if, the young officer thought, the darkness behind the man was casting him forward and not the other way around. Even after he had noticed the man, he remained difficult to see, on the verge of merging with the shadows. None of the other patrons

was looking at that part of the room. At first, the young officer assumed that none of them could see the man. With further scrutiny, however, he saw from their positions relative to the corner that every last one of them was aware of the presence sitting with them. Surely, the young officer thought, this could not be a god. Whatever the man was, staring at him so directly couldn't be the wisest action, yet the young officer seemed unable to direct his gaze elsewhere.

When he spoke, the man's voice was high, nasal—his accent not local. He said, "Come over here, boy."

It was hardly the way to address a Roman officer, and it would have earned another speaker a blow to the face. The young officer opened his mouth to correct the man but could not find the words to do so. His legs raised him from his chair and walked him to the corner. There was an empty chair across the table from the man. He nodded at it and the young officer lowered himself onto it. Though his back was now to the rest of the room, the young officer was not concerned. What worried him was this figure whose merest words could compel his obedience. He debated attacking the man—shoving the table into him, following with a thrust of his sword—but all the man would need to do was shout, "Stop!" and he would be left at his mercy. For the moment, it was better to remain still and to allow the situation to unfold. No doubt, old Lucian would have an applicable farm reference for him—something to do with letting the crops come up or watching to see what the fox does.

The man nodded at him again. "Your emblem."

"This?" The young officer touched the small image of the bull that fastened the ends of his cloak.

"What legion?" the man asked.

"The Ninth," the young officer said. "The Hispana."

To his surprise, the man's face split into a grin. "I wondered," he said, almost to himself. "It seems every last soldier in the empire's been sent to this place." There was a jug of wine and a pair of cups on the table. The man filled one of the cups and placed it in front of the young officer. As he did so, his sleeve slid up, uncovering the SPQR tattooed on his forearm. His single eye met one of the young officer's eyes. Its center was black—not

dark brown surrounding black, but entirely black. The young officer had the impression he was peering through an opening to an immense darkness. He swallowed and said, “What are you?”

The man tugged his sleeve down. “One who has been counted among the ranks of the Ninth,” he said. He lifted his cup. “Join me in drinking to it.”

The wine was thick, almost cloyingly sweet. The young officer took a mouthful and returned his cup to the table. “You served in the Ninth,” he said.

“I did.” The man refilled his own drink.

“It cannot have been that many years ago.”

“Nor was it.”

“You do not appear to have been too grievously wounded.”

“You mean, aside from this?” The man pointed to the eye patch. Before the young officer could stammer a reply, he said, “You’re correct. Even missing an eye, I could best any man in this room.”

Ignoring the taunt, the young officer licked his lips and said, “But you have refused the emperor’s summons to aid in the defeat of his enemy.”

“I have,” the man said. “I have done Rome a mighty service already. Indeed, it has not ended. Hadrian can spare me for this adventure.”

The young officer’s hand had found the hilt of his sword. “What service,” he said, “is it that allows a legionnaire to speak so casually of his emperor?”

“The same,” the man said, “that allows him to keep that handsome blade safely in its scabbard. And that allows him to ask you to place your hands flat on the table.”

There was no change in the man’s voice, yet for a second time, the young officer found himself following its instruction, as if it had only described an action he was about to perform anyway. “That’s better,” the man said.

“There are half a dozen men stationed outside this place,” the young officer said. “If I raise the alarm, they will answer.”

“By all means,” the man said, “invite them to join us.” When the young officer did not, he continued. “Never travel alone. Has no one told you that?”

“In the name of your oath as a soldier,” the young officer said, “I command you to release me.”

He might as well not have spoken. The man said, “You came here in search of trouble, didn’t you?”

Face flushed, the young officer did not reply.

“And instead,” the man said, “you found me.” Leaning back in his chair, he slid his right hand in among the folds of his robe. The young officer tensed, anticipating the appearance of a knife. He weighed calling for assistance from the other patrons, but could he reasonably expect them to help him? His hands stubbornly refused to leave their places on the table. Perhaps he could kick the man, break whatever hold he’d established over him.

Instead of a blade, however, the man withdrew a short, black horn, such as might have ornamented the skull of a not especially large goat. He set it on the table, and the young officer saw that it had been hollowed, carved into a horn of another sort. Its surface had been polished to a fine sheen so that the figures incised up and down it appeared to float beneath its surface. The young officer did not recognize any of the symbols. A few of them suggested Greek characters, a few more Latin, but they were mixed in with other arrangements of lines and circles to form a code alien to his experience. The writing seemed to shift as he studied it. Whatever his gaze fixed on held steady, but he had the overwhelming impression that the symbols at the edges of his vision were moving, turning like carvings to show themselves from a slightly different angle.

“This…” the young officer said.

“This came into my possession in Britannia,” the man said. “The man who had it before me swore it was a relic of lost Atlantis, which I judged so much horseshit the first time I heard it. Later…my views on the subject became more flexible, you might say.

“Could be there’s lesson in it for you. Listen, this is what happened.”

II

He called himself Bulinas. Said he was from some Greek island or another. Old enough for his hair and beard to be white, but young enough for his

back to be straight. A philosopher was how he was presented to me, a man of learning. The story was he'd had trouble with Domitian, which had led to him putting a good distance between himself and Rome. That ended with the emperor's assassination. Rumor had it Bulinas had foreseen the death, though you didn't need to be much of a seer to know that it was only a matter of time before the emperor's rivals struck at him. Anyway, the man himself never made such claims. He'd found his way into Trajan's favor, which was how he'd come to us in Britannia.

That's where we were, at Eboracum, rebuilding its wooden fort in stone. Hard work but it was a dangerous land. The Brigantes were forever on the verge of being attacked, and the Votadini were happy to sweep in for a quick raid if the mood took them. A couple of the older men had been with Agricola when he'd taken his trip up into Caledonia, and they told stories of the northern tribes that would freeze your blood and have you shitting your pants, as they were no doubt intended to. It was no secret that Agricola's invasion hadn't defeated the Caledonians in any kind of lasting way. Already, some of the forts that had been put up in the southern part of the place were being abandoned. It was our luck that the Caledonians and the Votadini—not to mention, the Brigantes—were as happy to slaughter one another as they were us. Had they been able to unite under a strong leader—well, you see how well the Judaeans have done, and they don't have a tenth the men those tribes did.

What it all means is, the prospect of a stone fort appealed to us, so we labored as fast as we could and prayed the locals would hold off attacking us for one more day. At first, when Bulinas rode in at the center of a sizable guard, we assumed he was some official or another, up from the south or maybe from further away to inspect our work. A great one for building was Trajan, and there appeared to be no shortage of functionaries available to assess our construction's progress. Most were trying to elicit bribes. If they were of consequence, they received a decent meal at the general's table and a modest token of our esteem for their service to the emperor. If they were not of consequence, their hints earned them a bowl of whatever the men were eating and a blank stare.

Within a day of this man's arrival, though, my centurion had summoned me to his tent and told me to name the eight best men in the century. I did.

Could each of them handle a horse? At least as well as could I, I said. That was good, the centurion said, because I was going to be riding out with them in another hour. We'd be accompanying our new visitor north, into Caledonia, with all due speed, until we'd delivered him to the fort at Loucovium. There, we were to wait with the man until he was ready to return.

It was not the first time a group of us had been assigned to guard a dignitary on his travels. But such a small group for so hazardous a destination seemed ill advised. A token force was stationed at Loucovium. Its name was at or near the top of the list of forts to be left to the Caledonians. The locals had to be aware of this. The chances were high we'd find ourselves riding into an attack on the place. At the very least, the area around the fort was bound to be thick with Caledonian warriors, unafraid to show themselves. I said as much. I said all of this to the centurion, who agreed that the mission was likely to be very dangerous. "Best make sure you choose a fast horse," he said.

I did. So did we all, including the man who introduced himself to me as Bulinas. His speech was plain, but not in the way of some of the visitors I'd had words with. Those men had talked to me as if I were their servant or an idiot child. This man said what he had to say to me as if he were one man and I another. He asked me how long our journey would take. I told him the rest of today and maybe half of tomorrow. Where would we shelter for the night? That depended on where we were, I said, but I hoped he prepared to bed down outside. He was no stranger to sleeping under the stars, Bulinas said. Was I sure that I could bear to leave the comfort of my quarters here? His question was mostly jest, though there was a challenge in it. It made me smile. "I expect we'll see," I said.

We rode out in the early afternoon. The best of the summer was past us, but the days were still long enough for us to cover a good part of the distance to Loucovium before nightfall. We kept a brisk pace, but not so much as to exhaust the horses. We followed the Roman roads, which were in poorer repair the further north we went. Soon, we were through the lands of the Brigantes and into the territory of the Votadini. They were supposed to be our allies, but most of the time it was more a case of they didn't fight us. There were Roman forts along the road, and we might have stopped at any

one of them, but our orders were to cross as much ground as we could, so we kept on until the light had left the sky completely. We could have tried our luck at one of the Votadini towns, but none of us, including our charge, felt inclined to test our luck. We located a decent clearing to one side of the road, next to a small stream, and struck camp.

That was where I had my first look at this horn, at the fireside. The nine of us had our weapons out and were tending to them. The swords and lances didn't really need any attention—had we been attacked, I would have counted on my blade to cut a man's arm from his body—but running the sharpening stone along the edge of your sword helped you feel a little less worried about whoever might be moving in the trees beyond the firelight. We should have outrun any report of our coming—no one had passed us on the road—but who knew who was there already? There were rumors of Caledonian warriors stationed along the main routes into their land. The Votadini might decide to take offence at our presence and deal with us. Hell, an ambitious gang of bandits might judge our number small enough to overcome. Not to mention, the things that were supposed to prowl the woods. Men would could trade their shapes for those of wolves and bears—beasts that looked like dogs but laughed like men, a monster that was said to drop out of the sky and drain the blood from you before you knew it was gone. Yes, most of it was so much horseshit, but at night, surrounded by a strange forest in a dangerous place, the most outrageous tales slide that much closer to truth.

Bulinas had withdrawn a wide, flat box from one of his saddlebags. He sat with it on his lap, as if it were a small table. It was made of dark wood that smelled of spices. The lid bore a mark that I had not seen: a circle broken about two-thirds of the way around. A simple catch held the box shut. Bulinas unfastened it and raised the lid. The campfire seemed to dim. I was seated close enough to him to have a peek inside the box. It was divided into a number of compartments, no two of them, as far as I could tell, the same size. Each held a different object. I saw a thick coin whose copper had greened with age. Below it was a curved fang, long as a man's finger; above it was a round stone like an eye. From the lowest slot, Bulinas lifted the horn. He cradled it in both hands and nodded over it three times, his lips

moving silently. When he finished, he turned to me, as if waiting for me to speak. I pointed to the horn and asked him what it was.

A relic was what he called it. He said it had come from Atlantis, from the time when its peaks still rose above the waves. In its last days, the kingdom had been besieged by a force of monsters—men with the heads of serpents. Those Atlantean troops who didn't run screaming at the sight of them were overwhelmed by the creatures. Soon, the serpent-men were within a day's ride of the capital. The Atlantean king wasn't much of a warrior; he was pale, sickly, in need of special medicines to give him strength. But he was a learned man and something of a sorcerer. He spent his days and nights frantically searching through scrolls and tablets that had been old when Atlantis herself had been young. At last, in a scroll that spoke of the darker gods, the king found what he was after. He called his palace guards to his chambers and began directing them to move all the furniture to the walls, clearing the center of the room. There, he drew symbols and secret marks on the floor. When he was finished, he ordered the guards out of his room and closed the doors behind them, forbidding them from opening the doors until he had summoned them.

The guards kept watch there all night, as the serpent-men drew up to the city walls. At one point, the entire palace shook, as if struck by an earthquake. Then the smell of charred flesh filled the air. Late the next morning, the king threw open the door to his chambers. The guards were amazed at the sight of him. He seemed to have become an old man overnight—his hair gone, his flesh loose and wrinkled. In the room with him, in the center of the figures he'd chalked on the floor, was a black goat. The king ordered the guards to kill it, which they did straightaway. Its blood was black too. Only when the goat was lying dead did one of the men notice that its eyes were those of a man and that its features resembled those of a human more so than those of a goat. But the king did not give them time to study the thing. He held out his hand for the nearest guard's sword, and with more strength than any of them would have guessed, he cut one of the goat's horns from its head. He dropped the sword and demanded a knife. With this, he scratched symbols onto the horn then sliced off its tips. He let the knife fall beside the sword and hurried to the palace's front door.

Already, the serpent-men had pierced the city's defenses and were swarming up its streets, fighting their way to the palace steps. What Atlantean soldiers were left had withdrawn to the palace, where the surviving commanders were trying to organize some form of counterattack. The king walked down the steps and strode through the ranks of his soldiers until he was standing in front of them, in the path of the oncoming serpent-men. As the officers realized what was happening and shouted for the troops to protect the king, he brought the goat's horn to his lips and blew. "He sounded the horn," Bulinas said, "and the serpent-men were routed."

I waited for him to explain exactly how the monsters had been defeated. He didn't. So I asked him. The children of the gods, he said, had come to the king's aid. Which children? I asked. Of which gods? The offspring of the black goat, he said. Did he mean Pan? He shook his head. There were other gods besides those who called Mount Olympus their home, he said. These were darker powers, ones whose very names it was ill advised to speak. Among these was the black goat, sire of a thousand young. Those who knew how might call on him, and if it suited the god's purpose, he would dispatch his brood to them.

It would have been outright rude to pronounce the man's story horseshit to his face, but my heart sank in my breast as I realized what the purpose of our journey was. We were going to convey him to Loucovium, where he would produce his horn, blow it a couple of times, and declare that the Caledonians had been defeated by the divine forces he'd sent to them. If we were fortunate, no actual Caledonians would put in an appearance while we were at the fort. I couldn't make up my mind whether the man sharing the warmth of the fire with me was a charlatan who'd found that horn at a market and invented a story to go along with it, or a fanatic whose belief was so thorough as to be compelling. Neither prospect was appealing, although I guessed a fraud might wish to depart the fort as soon as he could, before his deception became apparent. It was disappointing because I had liked the man, though it was not as unsettling as the thought that the officers and officials above me—up to and including the emperor himself, it seemed—had been swayed by Bulinas's words. I knew that the empire under Trajan was as big as it had ever been and that the emperor was desirous that it should remain so. The Caledonians were and had been an ongoing

problem—one that taxed the empire's resources to their limit, if not beyond. To resort to what was so obviously a fairy story to solve that problem, however, showed a kind of mania at work in my superiors that was not pleasant to contemplate.

My opinion of Bulinas and his horn changed the next morning. The attack came just before dawn, in a shower of arrows that missed the man standing watch but killed two of the men rising from their bedding and wounded another three. There were twenty-five or thirty of them, and they had surrounded us. I woke to an arrow burying itself in the ground beside my ear. I scrambled to my feet as a second flight of arrows filled the air and then a third. Another man went down, an arrow through his throat. The numbers were too large for bandits, but whether our attackers were Votadini or Caledonians wasn't the most pressing concern. Howling at the tops of their lungs, our foes burst from the trees, our ranks sufficiently thinned for them to deem the odds in their favor, which I guess they were.

From the corner of my eye, I had marked Bulinas awakening, throwing his hands over his head as arrows shot past it. Now, as I drew my sword and prepared to meet the men charging across the clearing at me, I heard him blowing his horn. *He believes*, I thought. I supposed that was better, though it wouldn't make our attackers' blades any less sharp.

Sometimes, in the seconds when you're waiting for an enemy to close, everything seems to speed up. He's on the far side of the field and then you're raising your shield to block his sword. Other times, the world slows down. He's running toward you and you note the blue tattoos curled up and around his chest and arms, the bronze necklace like a collar, the notches in the sword he's carrying like a torch. I watched the man nearing me stumble as his foot found a dip in the ground. Then he regained his stride, his face momentarily swept by embarrassment at his error. All the while, the blast of Bulinas's horn filled my ears, an ongoing scream that raised the hairs on the back of my neck.

Just as I was lowering my sword, preparing to duck from the swing I could see coming and draw my sword across the man's belly, the air around me—around us—broke open. It was as if a wall none of us had known was there had given way in several places at once. Black water spilled out of the bottom of each break, followed by a herd of demons. I don't know what

other name to give them. Each was the size of one of our horses, covered in thick, black, shaggy hair. Great horns rose from their heads. I could call them goats, but that would be like calling a dragon a lizard. Their faces were more like those of men than of beasts, and their mouths were full of teeth the size of spades. The sound that came from their throats was the answer to the scream of Bulinas's horn, and the smell that poured off of them was of burning pitch. The mere sight of them broke the attackers' charge, and in less time than it takes me to find the words for it, the things cut through them. They trampled men under hooves like axe blades. They smashed into them with their horns. They caught them in their teeth and bit them in two. A couple of the braver ones tried to make a fight of it, and the things tore them to pieces. Even after the last attacker was dead, the things continued to savage them, stamping what remained of them into ground muddied by black water and blood. Their screaming continued undiminished.

When the eyes of the first one locked onto me, I felt my bowels loosen; I'm not ashamed to say. Legionnaires or not, the rest of the men and I would be no more trouble to these creatures than had been our enemy. Their eyes were not those of goats, though I don't know as I'd go so far as to call them the eyes of men. They were full of something—a hateful intelligence that shone out like a lamp. I tried to shout for the others to stand fast, there was no point in running, but my tongue had gone dead in my mouth.

The note Bulinas blew on his horn didn't sound any different from the one that had summoned the things, but it had the opposite effect. Wheeling on their hind legs, they rushed to the openings that had brought them here and plunged into them. Once the last one was gone, the breaks seemed to flatten, as if becoming images of themselves. Bulinas ceased his note, and the openings fell to the ground in a rain of something like sand.

There was no point in asking him what had happened. I'd heard the story he'd told the night before. I'd been at the sites of enough battles to know that the aftermath of one is never a pretty thing. If I'd never seen men savaged like this—their bodies rent asunder, the remains shredded and flattened, floating in a muddy soup, the air heavy with a scorched reek—that was because the only battles I'd been at had been fought by men

against other men. There was nothing I could do about any of it except vomit, wipe my mouth, and look to the casualties.

Of the three who'd been struck by the enemy's arrows, two were in decent enough shape to continue the rest of the ride. The third man had been struck high in the chest, close enough to the heart to nick it. The blood was leaving him fast. All the rest of us could do was attend as he completed his journey out of this life. I hoped those things weren't waiting for him on the other side.

Our party, small to begin with, was down by four. A couple of the men opined that we should give our fallen comrades what funeral rites we could, which I agreed with. As far as I was concerned, this meant laying their corpses in a row, covering their faces with their blankets, and muttering whatever prayers anyone could remember. It was not the ceremony those fellows had been asking for, but in the time it would take us to do anything more, we might find ourselves under attack by the next group of warriors with an urge to test themselves against some legionnaires. Worse, Bulinas could put that black horn to his lips again and admit the demons to our presence a second time. So I pulled what rank was mine to pull, and in short order we arranged our comrades' bodies with as much dignity as we could. By the time the sun had cleared the trees, the six of us were mounted and riding north hard.

After the morning's assault, you may be sure, I saw threats everywhere—figures at the limits of my vision that, I was half convinced, ducked behind the nearest tree when I looked at them straight on. At least on horseback, we would make harder targets to hit. You may be sure too, after the rest of the morning's events, I could not stop thinking about Bulinas and his horn. Here, it seemed, was the solution to Trajan's Caledonian problem. We had been dispatched on a mission of inquiry to learn how effective the horn and its attending monsters would be against a Caledonian force. Either someone had intelligence that an attack was being planned on Loucovium, or the men stationed there would be tasked with creating an incident that would draw one down on them. From what I had witnessed already, I did not like the Caledonians' chances. No soldier disdains the weapon that saved his life—and I had no doubt that without the appearance of the demons, none of us would have left the clearing alive—but I was uneasy at enlisting such allies.

We had enough trouble with the loyalty of the Brigantes, and they were human. How much less could we trust creatures that scrambled up from the deepest pits of Tartarus?

The fort at Loucovium had been raised near the eastern shore of a river that flowed out of the southern end of a narrow lake. The surrounding terrain climbed into gradual hills whose crests were too far away to permit the Caledonians to position their archers on them. Tactically speaking, it was as sound a location for a fort as I'd seen. As we drew within view of it, I could see the tents pitched on the ground around it. At a guess, five hundred Caledonians were camped there. I pulled my horse up short, my hand on my sword, while I assessed the scene before me. At the near side of the encampment, a group of men were engaged in a game involving long sticks and a ball. Amidst the tents, other men sat talking. Alongside the road to the fort, a few sentries leaned on their spears. It did not have the look of a force ready to attack. A couple of the Caledonians caught sight of us and pointed us out to their companions, who stared at us then shrugged and returned to whatever they'd been doing.

Perhaps it was a ruse, an elaborate trap. But it didn't feel like that, nor did we have any option but to finish our ride. We set off at the fastest gallop our horses had left in them. The Caledonian sentries straightened up. A couple of them dipped their spears toward us, but they didn't follow this move with anything more hostile. The faces of the men who had beset us that morning were in my mind's eye. I wondered if any of them had been kin or comrades of the warriors to either side of us. I saw a man notch an arrow to his bow and lazily aim it in our direction, only to lower it with a laugh when one of his companions spoke to him.

At first, the officer in charge of the fort was overjoyed to greet us. It had been a while since he and the twenty-four men under his command had had much in the way of visitors. Once he realized that we were not the advance for the reinforcements he'd never stopped requesting, his enthusiasm waned, but he recovered enough to declare his hope that Bulinas's stay would impress on him the need to strengthen the garrison. Since early spring, the Caledonians had set up camp outside the fort in a brazen display he and his handful of men could do naught to dispute. The Caledonians knew this. Should they choose to, they could take the fort in short order. For

the time being, it suited their purposes to remain where they were, their mere presence a daily humiliation, but who could say how much longer that would be the case? Bulinas did nothing to correct the man's impression that he was here to take stock of the situation, nor did I or any of my men. What could we have said that wouldn't have sounded like madness?

For the next couple of days, little happened. Bulinas made a show of inspecting the fort, checking its supplies, mounting its walls to survey the enemy, listening to the commander's plans for an attack on them, but he passed much of his time in the tent that was provided for him, seated cross-legged on the ground, his eyes closed, his hands resting palms-up on his knees. Since my men and I were supposed to be his guards, we kept close to him. Whatever troops weren't on duty drifted by us to catch up on the news of the wider world. All of them asked about our charge, but we said that we didn't know anything about him. It was true. Or true enough. You can imagine I was full of questions, as were the rest of my men. We passed them back and forth in low voices as we stood outside the tent. Who was this man? Was he a sorcerer? How had he come by the horn? What about the other items in his box? Could any of them work similar feats? It would have been the simplest thing to duck inside and put our questions to him. He had spoken to me, already. Who could predict what else he would disclose? Yet I stayed where I was, my feet anchored by that uncertainty. That Bulinas might answer my queries was not without peril. Thus far, I had been witness to a sight that would plague my memory until my death. Who could say what other, worse things he might show me? That was the riddle that lay underneath all the others: what kind of man has the use of such a thing?

The morning of our third day at the fort was gray, full of fog and a chill rain. Bulinas stuck his head out of his tent, frowned, and returned inside. When he reappeared, he was wearing a black cloak with the hood up. I accompanied him as he climbed the fort's eastern wall, which overlooked the greater part of the Caledonian camp. They were going about their business much as they had been the day of our arrival. They did not appear to like the rain any more than we did. Bulinas studied them for a long time —enough that I thought he might be searching for something in particular, and I started trying to figure out what it could be. The fog rendered large

portions of the camp difficult to distinguish. A pair of Caledonians noticed us watching them but didn't seem to find it of much worry.

When he threw his cloak over his shoulder, I was surprised to see the black horn in Bulinas's hand. I had expected more fanfare leading up to its use against the Caledonians. At the very least, I had assumed he'd have the fort's commander with him. No. He lifted the horn to his lips, inhaled deeply, and blew. For all the force he put into it, the note that emerged was no louder than the one I'd heard in the forest clearing. The horn screamed its shrill, strange sound, and everyone who heard it stopped what he was doing. Inside the fort's walls, men scrambled for their weapons, sure that the Caledonians had finally commenced their assault. Outside, on the plane, the reaction was mixed. Most of the men stood around gawking at one another, unsure what the signal meant. A few of them went for their swords and spears, fearing, I suppose, a raid by us. By the time those on either side of the rampart had identified Bulinas as the source of the shriek that had scraped their ears, the air was full of cracks from which black water sprayed, as if from a breaking dam. The cracks burst and the demons leapt from them in a hairy mass.

There was an instant, as I was watching the faces of the Caledonians below me, rent by puzzlement and fear, when the grimmest sort of satisfaction suffused me. *Here you go, you murderous bastards*, I thought. *Here's an enemy'll grind you and your irritant kingdom to dirt, to nothing. Let's see what your tattoos and your blue paint do against these things.* As the demons smashed into the nearest Caledonians, I grinned. One of the things tore through a Caledonian shield and the arm behind it. The fog kept me from seeing too far into the Caledonian camp, but I had little trouble picturing what was happening there. These things, the black goat's children, were slaughtering any and all people they found. Because of my closeness to Bulinas's horn, whose shriek went on, I didn't hear the screams coming from within the fort, at first, and once I did, it took a moment to place them. I turned and saw one of the fissures in the air hanging in the center of the fort, black water pooling on the ground, a trio of demons killing the men who could not fight them off. Half of the fort's residents lay dead and dismembered, including all but one of the men who'd survived the journey

here with me. While I watched, two of the demons caught a man between them and ripped him apart.

My sword was in my hand, and I would have gone to my death had I not remembered the second blast Bulinas had blown three days ago—the one that had sent the monsters away. Stepping closer, I bellowed at him to stop. He had done enough; the enemy was defeated. It was time for him to return these beasts to hell.

Instead of ceasing his blasting, however, the man prolonged it. Now the earth began to shake, all at once and violently. On either side of the fortress wall, cracks raced across the ground, black water leaping from them in geysers. The rifts opened and more of the goat-demons clambered up out of them, joining their brethren in the mayhem. A crack split the wall behind me, releasing further demons before that section of the rampart collapsed. The cries of the things had drowned out the sound of Bulinas's horn, though I could see him continuing to blow it. The shaking of the earth grew stronger, almost knocking me from my feet. Except for us, no one was alive inside the fort, nor did I see any men living where the Caledonians had been. There were only the demons, galloping through the muddy remains of both forces, their eyes alight with malicious joy, the smell of their smoldering hair floating on the air. And still Bulinas sounded his horn, as the earth gave way in longer and deeper vents, releasing more black water and more demons.

I didn't know what the man intended. Was this a demonstration of sufficient devastation to leave no doubt about his weapon's power? Or something else—something grander, madder? There was no way to ask him. He couldn't have heard me if I'd been yelling in his ear. I steadied myself, raised my sword, and cut his right arm from him. Still grasping the horn, it dropped between us. His eyes wide, Bulinas turned toward me, unbalanced by the loss of his arm. Blood sprayed from the stump. His mouth was open, his lips working to form some word, curse, or question, but I did not learn what it was. In two bounds, one of the largest demons sprang up the wall, caught Bulinas in its teeth, and leapt off into the fog with him.

It was followed by another, equally big demon, which landed on the spot where Bulinas had been standing. It stared at me, at my sword dripping

blood, and I stared at it, at its mouth smeared with gore. There was more of man than goat in its enormous features, and I saw in them great age—age to compete with that of the mountains, of the sea. Its yellow eyes had watched the waters swallow Atlantis, and even then the demon had been old. This thing had seen Jupiter overthrow Saturn. It had witnessed Saturn casting down Uranus. My fingers loosened and my sword slipped from my hand. My knees bent and I fell prostrate before the beast. It snorted.

When I rose, it was with Bulinas's horn in my grasp. The demon's face showed what I am sure was surprise. The note I sounded was a poor copy of Bulinas's, but it served the purpose. The demon resisted it, striving to maintain the freedom it must have thought at hand. It snapped its teeth and pawed the dirt, smoke streaming from its black coat. Whatever spell or compact controlled it was too strong, and it hurled itself from the top of the wall through one of the cracks in the air.

III

The man leaned back in his chair. The shadows around him shifted, as if someone had moved a lamp from one side of the room to the other. "Of all the men," he said, "who saw the day break in that place, I was the only one left alive. Already, the remnants of the Caledonians and their camp had slid into the crevasses that had split the earth and were drawing closed, leaving a muddy expanse. The wreckage inside the fort suffered the same fate. I could not stay where I was, so I picked up my sword, tucked the horn in my belt, and made my way down from the wall. I knew I was headed south, but I was not certain of my destination. Why not Eboracum or one of the closer Roman forts? This thought occurred to me while I was not yet out of sight of Loucovium. It was no great honor to have led a group of men, including an important visitor, to their deaths, but under other circumstances—had that first ambush been more successful—I could have shouldered the responsibility. The horn, though, changed everything. I'm a lousy liar, always have been. Whatever story I attempted about the fates of Bulinas and my men—not to mention, everyone else who'd been at Loucovium—I would not be able to conceal my possession of the horn. In short order, I would be commanded to surrender it, or it would be taken from me, and

then it would be used again. Perhaps the one to do so would exert more control over it than had Bulinas—or perhaps not.

"Such a wager was too big for me to take. I could try to lose the thing—bury it somewhere, toss it into the sea—but could I be certain it would not be unearthed, washed up on a beach? I couldn't. No matter which way I turned the situation, I could see no solution but for me to keep and guard the horn as best I could for as long as I could. I left my armor by the side of the road, though I kept my sword, wrapped in my cloak. My clothes were a mess, and my travel made them worse. I moved south, avoiding the Roman forts along the way, stealing food when I could, buying it with what little coin I had when I couldn't. Though it pained me to do so, I skirted Eboracum. At Londinium, I bluffed my way onto a merchant ship, which took me across the Oceanus Britannicus to Gesoriacum. From there, I wandered the empire, keeping to its margins. I hoped I might locate someone to relieve me of my responsibility, but that has not come to pass. I've learned much. I now know that Bulinas kept the horn in his box to shield himself from its effects. Having it next to me for so long has left me…changed from what I was."

The man stood, picking up the horn and returning it to the interior of his robes. "You remind me of men I served with," he said, not unkindly. "If I thought you would take heed of my words, I would caution you against taking part in tomorrow's activities. Since my warning would fall on deaf ears, I'll offer another in its stead: when you see your death approaching, meet it well." The man turned and walked toward the corner behind him. The shadows seemed to surge forward to embrace him. To the young officer, it looked like the man entered a long, dark corridor. Then it and he were gone.

The young officer glanced around the room, but if any of the other patrons had witnessed the man stepping into the shadows, none offered a sign of it. Nor did any of them challenge him as he departed the inn. The expression on his face kept his superior officer from asking him where he'd been for so long—and alone too. It may have been what determined that man to assign the young officer command of a small detachment of soldiers the next day. This group was one of several sent out and tasked with the destruction of local villages. If the young officer recalled the advice he'd received the

previous day, he had little trouble discounting it. This was the same duty he'd been performing since his arrival, and if there was one thing this duty was not, it was dangerous.

When the Judaean ambush erupted from the huts and hovels to either side of him and his men, there was no time for anything except the arrow that had struck his horse's eye and dropped it to the street. He managed to roll free and to come up with his sword drawn, but Judaean warriors were everywhere. His men were swiftly and mercilessly overborne. It was all so fast. He swung his blade at a man, who parried the blow and returned it, opening himself to a cut to the neck. Like a kick from a horse, an arrow hit the young officer high in the left leg. He staggered forward, and a Judaean fighter lunged at him. His armor deflected the thrust into the meat of his right bicep. He cried out and released his sword.

It was over. His men were dead or lying wounded, waiting for their attackers to finish them. From behind, hands grabbed his shoulder and pushed him toward a man who was drawing a long knife from his belt. The Judaean captain was standing in front of a dim doorway in whose shadows the young officer caught a glimpse of the face of the man with the black horn. As best he was able, he straightened up. After the story the man had told him, the young officer supposed it was futile to hope that he would intervene, raise the horn to his lips, and bring destruction to the Judaeans. At least he was present. If not a god, then not a man either. Was that sufficient consolation? The Judaean captain pushed the young officer's forehead back and pressed the knife to his throat. He wasn't sure, but he doubted it.

Homemade Monsters

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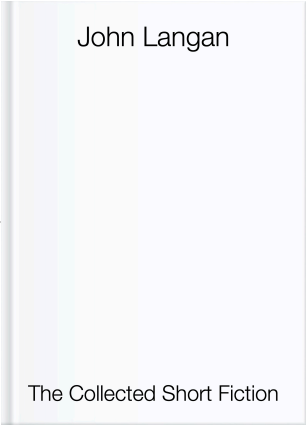

Was my childhood happy? I'm sorry, I—I don't know how to answer that.

If by "happy" you mean, were my physical needs met, for food, shelter, medical care, then yes, without a doubt. I was never hungry that I can recall (outside of "Where's dinner? I'm *starving*" complaints). My father provided the money, and my mother made certain I was dressed in the latest fashions (however much the photographic record of those outfits makes me cringe). Whenever I complained of any ailment, I was whisked off to the pediatrician's office posthaste (apparently I had had numerous emergency visits when I was too young to remember, for everything from a fall during which I smacked my head on the garage's concrete floor, to a small but mysterious bump that my mother found between my eyebrows).

If, however, "happiness" implies contentment, satisfaction with one's family and surroundings, then I'm less sure. I loved my parents as feverishly, as desperately, as only a small child can, but that love was threaded with fear. I wasn't afraid of them physically; while I'm sure they swatted my butt or slapped my hand when I was a toddler, I don't remember them lifting a hand even in threat until I was a teenager, and, in all fairness, my father's warnings of violence were mostly a rhetorical device to stop me arguing with him. I was their oldest child, the product of seven years' effort at conceiving, and their love surrounded me. Perhaps because I lived in such close proximity to their affection, though, I was sensitive to its daily fluctuations, which, as I grew older and first my younger brother, then each of my sisters, appeared, grew more pronounced. My feelings about those siblings were shot through with ambivalence, the fierce, animal love I had for them alloyed with jealousy and frustration—and guilt, at my conflicted response to them. While our family expanded, our house grew steadily smaller, a structure that had been built for three straining to accommodate

twice that number. My parents did their best with the space, converting the original living room into their bedroom, transforming the garage into a new, larger living room, doubling up me and my brother in their former room and my sisters in my old room. But there was nowhere in the house to go for privacy, except the bathroom, and even there, it wouldn't be long before someone would be knocking on the door, telling you to hurry up. It's funny: For all that my siblings and I have gone our separate ways in things like religion and politics, each of us lives in a house that has an upstairs and a downstairs, a place where there's room to be alone.

I'm digressing. The fact is, all the emotions I experienced seemed enormous, much too big for my body. It was as if they roamed the space around me, and every now and again, depending on the situation, stepped into me, filling me to overflowing. I might have been a city in one of the giant-monster films I watched on the *4:30 Movie*. One minute, everything was peaceful and calm, the next, a three-hundred-foot-tall reptile was shouldering buildings aside, crushing cars and buses underfoot, breathing jets of flame at the hordes of people fleeing it. Afterward—especially if I had been angry—I felt wrecked, hollowed out by what had inhabited me.

My toys—yes, you're right. I did say that what I wanted to talk about concerns a toy. I was pretty well off, in that department. Most of my toys were what they call action figures today; though I don't remember the description attaching to them at the time. First I had G.I. Joe, twelve inches tall, articulated, with a crew cut and beard made of a soft, fuzzy material that came out in clumps after you took him in the bath with you. I had Eagle-Eye, whose eyes moved from left to right and back again—scanning the horizon, I guess—when you slid a lever set in the back of his head, and Kung-Fu Grip, whose curled hands were cast in a flexible plastic that started to tear along the palms after a little bit of play. They were succeeded by the first generation of *Star Wars* figures, who were a third his size, not half as posable, and infinitely cooler. They and their vehicles and playsets soon occupied the top positions on my birthday and Christmas lists. What I most wanted, however, was something that, for years, was nowhere to be found outside of the movies. This was a figure of Godzilla, the king of the monsters, whose rampages and battles had been a staple of my imaginative diet since first grade, when I first learned of his existence via several of my

classmates, who recounted what I later discovered was an extremely inaccurate version of *King Kong vs. Godzilla* to me. From the start, he interested me much more than his smaller American cousin, King Kong. Perhaps it was because he resembled the dinosaurs with which, I, like every other boy in my class, was fascinated. That he didn't die—at least not permanently—but continued on in a series of adventures that gradually recast him in the role of hero, also appealed to me. I was never much good with tragedy; although, in all fairness, what child is?

In *Godzilla vs. the Smog Monster*, which must have been one of the first Godzilla films I saw, the little boy who was the son of one of the (human) protagonists had a number of Godzilla figures ranged among his toys. The instant I saw them, I coveted those figures as I had no toy before. There was nothing like them at either of the local Kay-Bee Toy & Hobby Shops, and it would be another decade until the first Toys "R" Us appeared in the area. In those pre-Internet days, I knew of no other way to search for a toy I didn't possess. I had a sickening suspicion that the Godzillas were unavailable outside of Japan, or, worse, that they were only props, commissioned for the movie, then taken home by the child-actor.

So desperate did I become for my own figure of the giant monster that, when I was in the fourth grade, I fashioned one myself, repurposing an eight-inch Captain Kirk, whom I'd never found all that interesting in the first place. After stripping him of his accessories, uniform, and boots, I colored him with a green Magic Marker whose ink dried in long smears. Next, I used Scotch tape to affix to his back a row of dorsal plates I'd painstakingly scissored from a piece of cardboard, then to fasten to his butt a tail I'd rolled from a piece of aluminum foil. I'd tried to construct a Godzilla mask out of a couple of cardboard tabs, a pen, and still more tape, but it required a concentrated effort of the imagination for me to view the head as a success. All the same, the figure was the closest I had to an actual Godzilla toy, and I made the most of it.

Using cardboard tubes, the cardboard backs of the legal pads my father brought home from IBM, aluminum foil, and roll after roll of tape, I built playsets for my monster to trample. I borrowed one of my mother's brownie pans, lined it with foil to represent the Hudson River, and put together a passable replica of the Mid-Hudson Bridge. A cookie sheet beside it

supported a model of the Mid-Hudson Civic Center, and several of the tallish buildings I remembered from trips into the city of Poughkeepsie. The scale was off, of course, between the monster and the metropolis, but there was something deliriously terrifying and delightful in the image of Godzilla striding through landscapes familiar to me. In my most elaborate creation, I took over half the dining room table to build a model of my house and the houses in its immediate vicinity. I cut up sheets of construction paper into the shapes of our various yards, and taped them together at the margins. The trees that grew thickly around our homes were toothpicks I'd found in the kitchen junk drawer, left over from one party or another. I broke off pieces of an eraser to hold each toothpick upright, and raided the hall closet where we kept medical and cosmetic supplies for a bag of cotton balls, which I separated, dabbed with my green Magic Marker, and slid on top of the toothpicks for the trees' crowns. The houses themselves were a mix of boxes I'd scavenged from around the house and ones I'd put together with cardboard and tape. I went so far as to include the elementary school where I'd attended kindergarten, five buildings up the road, and the swamp behind it. My mother was sufficiently impressed with the final result of a long afternoon's work to insist on photographing it with me standing beside, holding my improvised Godzilla. My brother, who came and went as I worked, standing silently at my elbow until I told him to get lost, pronounced my work cool, but that was mostly because Mom was there, and he wanted to participate in her approval. Neither of my sisters paid my project any notice. By the time my father stepped through the front door, I was well on my way to leveling the neighborhood, much to my mother's regret, but, like my brother, Dad joined in her praise.

I barely heard him. I was caught up in a private movie so vivid it might have been a memory. I was standing in my driveway. To the north, beyond the wide, overgrown field across the road from my house and those of my neighbors, Godzilla occulted the sky. Skyscraper-tall, he appeared to move slowly, ponderously, yet each of his earth-shuddering footsteps brought him fifty yards nearer. All around me, birds rose from the trees in panicked flocks. Behind me, my house creaked as the ground continued to tremble; from inside it, I heard my mother's good glasses ringing as the vibrations jostled them. Trees cracked and splintered as Godzilla's feet pushed through

them. He lowered a splayed foot the size of a barn onto the field across the street, and paused. Eyes burning with white light swept the half-dozen houses and the school that comprised my little neighborhood, as if they were a row of strange growths. I could hear the monster breathing, inhaling and exhaling hurricanes of air, and alongside that sound, a low, steady rumble like the earth's plates sliding against one another. Heat poured off Godzilla's corrugated hide, wilting and blackening the tall grass next to him and raising sweat all over me. A smell of burning metal wrinkled my nostrils. When he opened his mouth and roared, I clapped my hands to my ears and dropped to the ground, as if I could slip under the noise that radiated from him, bursting the windows of my house and all the houses on the road. Once more, Godzilla was on the move. The earth shook so hard it bounced me onto my back. He'd corrected his course a few degrees to his right and was making straight for Eddie Isley's house, which was separated from mine by old Mr. Warner's. The monster's left foot swept the front of Mr. Warner's gray farmhouse, shearing it off and causing the rest of the building to sway backward, half-fallen. His right foot came down squarely on the Isleys' two-story blue colonial, bursting the house like a balloon. Siding, Sheetrock, and wood flew in all directions. Nor was that enough. A segment of the back wall and the deck remained standing, as did the small barn behind the house in whose neat interior Mr. Isley kept his tools and his car when the weather was bad. That giant foot raised again and drove down once, twice, with sufficient force to pulverize what was left of the Isleys', not to mention sending the Warners' house crashing the rest of the way to the ground, and bouncing me around as if I were on a trampoline. Godzilla stepped forward and kicked the Isleys' barn, most of which disappeared in a cloud of splinters; although I watched part of its black roof arc high into the sky. He snorted and continued up the street.

How did I feel? I felt *great*. What I was watching—and I swear, that was how it seemed to me, as if I were actually there, witnessing all of this, and not imagining it—the scene playing out, exhilarated me. The sheer terror the presence of this gargantuan monster evoked from me was balanced, maybe exceeded, by the profound delight, the joy, it also produced. For once, my emotions were in proportion to my surroundings. It didn't hurt,

either, that Godzilla had visited such utter destruction upon the home of Eddie Isley.

Eddie. I guess he's the reason I'm here talking to you—him and what happened to him. We were the same age, and had been in school together since Eddie and his family had moved into their house when we were in second grade. I'm pretty sure they had come from Arizona, though what had brought them to upstate New York, I don't know. Possibly his father's job: he was with IBM, as was my dad, as was the father of every other kid you asked. (At that time, the Hudson Valley was IBM country, from Wiltwyck down to Ossining, with stops along the way for Poughkeepsie and East Fishkill.) Eddie was shorter than I was by a couple of inches, but he was better proportioned; even before the adolescent growth spurt that would raise the top of my head above first my mother and then my father, I had long arms and longer legs, as if my body were laying in plans for the changes to come. Where my hair was a fine, dirty blond that I wore in no definite style, Eddie's was a thick, shining black that he parted on the right with military precision. A pair of heavy, square glasses defined his face, while my own glasses would wait until I was in fifth grade.

Because we were neighbors and the same age, not to mention students at the same Catholic elementary school, the assumption on the part of our parents was that we would be friends. Our interests were similar enough to place us within the same social group at school, where the more athletically inclined kids and the more academically inclined kids were continuing the process of differentiation and separation that would reach its culmination in high school. Not only did Eddie and I like to read, we liked to read the same types of things: books about older cultures, the Greeks and the Romans, the Vikings and the Samurai. I was fascinated by their myths and legends, Eddie by their history, especially the battles they'd fought. Both of us liked to draw, but my artwork was influenced by the styles of the comic books I pored over: Its figures were big, bold, either engaged in a dramatic act or posed in the immediate aftermath of one. Eddie's pictures showed the effect of the military histories he read: Their figures were small, almost miniature, and there were a lot of them, usually wearing the same uniform, and in the midst of an enormous undertaking, usually a battle. I loved the wealth of

detail with which he loaded each of his drawings. He ignored my work, except to pass an occasional snide remark about it.

From the distance of three and a half decades, I can recognize that Eddie's dismissal of my artwork was driven by jealousy. He was intensely competitive—in class, each of us tried to have his hand up first when the teacher asked a question—and he resented anything that was done better than he could, whether a drawing or an essay that the teacher invited me to read out loud. For the three years of school we shared, there was no success I could have, but Eddie had to mock it. Also from this remove, I can't help wondering where he had learned such behavior. He had an older sister, Yvette, but she was five years his senior, and from what I observed, she was as uninvolved with her little brother as she could manage. I don't recall much about his parents, except that they had a rule that you had to remove your sneakers upon entering their house, and that they served celery sticks smeared with peanut butter as a snack. His mother did—she brought them downstairs to their basement, which was furnished and served as a family gameroom. She was pleasant enough to me, but I have the impression of her as distracted, as if always listening for the phone to ring or someone to knock on the door. I saw Eddie's father much less frequently; he worked what struck me as much longer hours at IBM than did my dad. I remember him as distracted, too—or, not so much distracted as detached. It's difficult for me to picture either half of that distant couple unleashing the same withering vitriol on their son that he used on me. But maybe they did.

Whatever its source, from time to time Eddie's verbal nastiness was accompanied by a physical expression of his sentiment. This never happened at school. Even during recess, when the location of the playground monitor might allow you to raise your hand against someone, Eddie did not risk the shoves or sloppy punches of the rest of us; instead, he stalked away from confrontation, a scowl darkening his face. If you ran after him and grabbed hold of his arm to stop him, he flung your hand off with a windmill of his arm and continued on his path. Outside of school, which is to say, in his basement or my room, or either of our yards, or the schoolyard down the road, where we sometimes went to explore the swamp behind it, things were different. Eddie's disdain for a drawing I had completed would be followed by him sweeping his hand across the table at

which we were seated, catching the sheet of paper I'd labored over and crumpling it, sending it onto the floor along with a dozen of the Magic Markers we'd been sharing. His envy over a new toy my grandparents had sent me—say, the Colonial Viper from the first *Battlestar Galactica*, which fired a red missile from its nose—would lead to him pleading for me to let him play with it, just for a minute, *please*, and, once I gave in and handed it to him, finding the quickest way to break it: in the case of the Viper, jamming the missile in so far it because stuck and could not be fired. Any reproach on my part was likely to be met with a sarcastic, "Sorry," and a remark about how my drawing hadn't been any good in the first place, or what cheap junk my toy had been.

It's funny: It's not only that I remember how I felt at those moments—a mix of anger, frustration, and resentment that enveloped me in a fiery sphere—but, when I revisit them, I still feel the same emotion, incandescent around me. No matter how much I think I've grown, matured, no matter how many white hairs the mirror shows have infiltrated my beard, the instant I recall that crumpled sheet of paper, that damaged toy, there's a direct route in my mind to my younger self and the feelings that rampaged through it. It's as if I'm still there.

I know, I know. Why didn't I cut ties with Eddie, at least in those locations where he could do most harm? There was a part of me that recognized this as the most sensible course of action. That level of resolve, however, was beyond me. No matter how egregious Eddie's act, it wasn't long before I was at the back door of his house, asking his mother if he could come out to play. When he emerged, he wore a slight smirk that said he knew what he'd done wasn't that big a deal. For a time, he would be on what for him was good behavior, restricting any hostility in his comments to me.

If I couldn't keep away from Eddie, over time, I learned to keep anything that was precious to me out of his sight. This included my improvised Godzilla figure, which seemed guaranteed to arouse the full measure of his contempt. I have yet to work out how he found it. We were in my room, playing Stratego with my younger brother. Eddie and I faced each other while my younger brother looked on, then, after I had defeated Eddie, my brother and I played. Irritated by his loss, Eddie prowled the undersized room. Three moves into the game, I heard him saying, "What's this?"

He was holding my handmade Godzilla. The expression on his face was blank; he might have been trying to identify what the figure in his grip was supposed to be. I opened my mouth to say I don't know what, something that would distract Eddie, call his attention away from the toy, back to me. My brother spoke first. "Hey," he said, "he's got your Godzilla." The name completed a circuit. Eddie's face brightened. He said, "Godzilla?" and with a wrench of his hands, tore the figure's rubber head off and flung it across the room. I scrambled to my feet, one of my sneakers lashing out and striking the Stratego board, clearing it. Eddie shifted his grip to the toy's waist and snapped it in half. He opened his hands and let the pieces of the figure drop to the carpet. "Doesn't seem like the king of the monsters to me."

My brother, in a move both brave and reckless, had wrapped his arms around my legs. Had he not, I would have crossed the room in a heartbeat. I could see myself leaping onto my bed and using the mattress to trampoline into Eddie. I was beyond angry, beyond upset; I was the center of a fury so transcendent that, for an instant, it seemed as if I could stretch out my hand and the rage would pour from me in a white blaze that would burn Eddie Isley to a shadow on the wall. As it was, my brother held me in place, and said to Eddie, "You'd better leave."

How I would like to be able to report that the sight of me in my rage unnerved Eddie, registered on his face as the slightest faltering in the sick smile that had crept onto it, the faintest lowering of his brows with concern. It did not. He opened the door to my room, stepped out into the hallway, and departed the house, all without another word. My brother held me until we heard the back door *shunk* closed. Then he released me. I wanted to kick him for what he'd done, but I was more concerned with sprinting to the back door, hauling it open with enough force to rattle the venetian blind hung on it, and rushing onto the porch. Eddie had moved fast, himself, crossing the field between my house and Mr. Warner's, reaching the pair of enormous evergreens whose needled skirts marked the edge of the Warners' yard. I don't know if he heard me throw open the door; he didn't look back, anyway. I considered tearing after him, but with this much of a head start, he'd likely outpace me to his house, and if I caught, tackled, and started pounding him, I'd be doing so in his backyard. I knew how that would look,

to his family and to mine. So I waited until Eddie was out of sight behind the evergreens, then returned inside, closed and locked the back door, and retreated to my room to plan my revenge.

There wasn't much to it. The next day, after I came home from school, I went into the backyard to the spot behind the garden shed where my father piled the tree branches that the winter snow and ice had stripped from the trees. He would build that heap as the spring and summer thunderstorms brought down more limbs, until the fall, when we would dump the leaves we'd raked on top of the wood and my father would set the whole thing ablaze. I sifted through the branches gathered there until I found one that was a little taller than I was, mostly straight, and not too heavy. I snapped what smaller branches remained from it and carried it to the porch, where I set it on the picnic table there. I went into the house for a roll of duct tape and a pair of scissors. Outside again, I dug my pocketknife out of the right front pocket of my school pants. My father had bought it for me last summer vacation, at the gift shop at Fort William Henry, in Lake George. Its side panel was decorated with an image of the fort in vivid green and brown. I unfolded the blade and taped the hilt to the narrower end of the branch. I used enough of the duct tape to secure the knife reasonably well and, by the end of my efforts, had a decent spear. I didn't bother trying to bring it inside; my mother wasn't fond of the mess such imports made. Instead, I carried the spear to the white metal garden shed, inside whose right-hand door I positioned my new weapon.

No, I wasn't plotting to kill Eddie; this isn't a murderer's confession. I was as furious with him as I had been the moment he'd destroyed my improvised Godzilla; there appeared to be no danger of that emotion fading anytime soon. Yet my rage was mixed with a terrible grief that threatened to send tears flooding down my cheeks every time I looked at the ruin of the figure I had devoted so much time to crafting. My brother had suggested I could repair it, borrow the Krazy Glue and restore it to what it had been. For once, I hadn't told him to shut up, only shook my head from side to side. The pieces of the figure seemed charged with the contempt Eddie had visited upon them. When you're a kid, you internalize the violence that's done to you; you don't know how not to. Someone calls you a name, and it hurts, and part of the reason it hurts is because you fear it might be true. A

toy that I had fashioned had been ruined, and I was afraid that it had deserved to be. What I wanted now was to assert myself against Eddie, and in so doing, to refute the scorn he'd inflicted on me.

Yes, it is pretty sophisticated reasoning for a ten-year-old. Of course I didn't frame what I intended to do in those terms. My thoughts were more concrete. In another couple of days, I would tell Eddie I was going on an excursion into the swamp behind the elementary school down the road, and ask if he had any interest in joining me. I had no doubt he would accept my invitation. For one thing, while I hadn't had him back to my house, at school, I'd kept a tighter lid on my emotions than at any point in the past; even when Eddie asked me how Godzilla was doing after his defeat by the Hands of Isley, I smiled tightly and looked down, as if embarrassed. For another thing, Eddie was inordinately proud of his skill at orienteering; I say "inordinately" because, on our previous voyages into the swamp, he hadn't impressed me as any more competent a navigator than I was. Spear in hand, then, I planned to lead Eddie deep into the swamp, much farther than we'd been, until everything around us was unfamiliar. Once we were good and lost, I would demand that he apologize for destroying my homemade Godzilla, for all his acts of wanton violence. I would brandish the spear to reinforce my demand. That I might have to put it to use was a possibility I rejected. Eddie behaved like a bully, and the knowledge I'd aggregated from a host of comic books, TV shows, and movies that dealt with such types told me that they were, finally, cowards, who, if confronted convincingly, would back down. I wish I could convey the trembling pleasure with which I contemplated my plot. Lying in bed at night, on the verge of dropping into sleep, I would picture Eddie, standing knee-deep in the swamp's brackish water, glancing from side to side at the strange trees fencing us in, his lip quivering as he struggled to keep from crying.

That vision was the closest I came to my plan's success. While the early stages went smoothly, by the time we were in the swamp, my design had unraveled with surprising speed. From the moment we stepped onto the dirt ridge that served as a pathway through the swamp's outer reaches, Eddie had kept well ahead of me. Though he hadn't commented on it, he'd registered my spear with a slight widening of his eyes, a jerk of his head. Our previous journeys into the swamp, I hadn't carried anything with me,

afraid to lose it in the murky water. For me to have changed my behavior, and to have done so by bringing a weapon with me, had raised Eddie's suspicions—not enough for him to refuse to accompany me, but sufficiently for him to maintain a cautious distance between us. I had anticipated we would travel with our usual leisurely pace; instead, Eddie moved briskly, leaping from the end of the dirt ridge onto the first of the chain of small hummocks that formed the route into the swamp's interior. He hopped to the second while I was still on the ridge. I was well practiced at traversing the network of dirt mounds that thrust their grass-covered peaks above the dark water, but the addition of the spear upset my balance. I miscalculated a couple of my jumps, and paid for it with a sneaker full of cold water. The deeper into the swamp we pushed, the thicker the air became, humid and heavy with the stink of the skunk cabbages that populated the hummocks to either side of us. Sweat glued my T-shirt to my back. Clouds of tiny insects drifted through the air, and when I landed on one of the diminutive islands, the insects swarmed my eyes and nose. Already, we were in new territory. Eddie launched himself onto the trunk of a huge, fallen tree and ran along until he reached the wreckage of its crown, where he dropped onto the first of a new line of mounds leading further into the swamp. I struggled to keep up with him. Ferns of prehistoric size sprouted from the soil of this latest archipelago and flailed against me when I landed on their hummock, as if trying to force me off. Great trees whose trunks were wrapped with ivy and patched with moss enclosed us; from somewhere in their ranks, a bird uttered a stuttering cry like a monkey's call. Throughout, I maintained my grip on the spear, but I was more worried about the object in the right front pocket of my jeans. I had stuffed the decapitated head of my handmade Godzilla there with the intent of confronting Eddie with it during my demand for his apology. The problem was, the pocket was shallow, the jeans a fraction too small, and the figure's head felt constantly on the verge of falling out into the swamp. Nothing was happening as I had imagined it. The fury I'd worked to contain, to channel into my plan for revenge, was leaking from the growing cracks in that plot like radiation from a damaged reactor. It seemed to spill out over my surroundings, making them ripple like a sheet in the wind. In that rage—through it—I was aware of something, a kind of presence, an attention, waiting just out of sight. It was vast as the swamp, alien.

Once Eddie reached a hummock that was sizable enough to host a pair of slender birches, he paused. This, I thought, was my chance if I could take it. I sprang from hummock to hummock, unconcerned when one of my sneakers splashed the water. *Here I come,* I thought. *Here I come*.

He punched me at the moment my feet touched the mound on which he was waiting. It was a shot to the gut that drove the air out of me and sent me backward, my arms flailing as I sought and failed to keep my balance. Butt-first, I fell into the swamp's water. For a terrifying instant, I was sure I was going to go under the water's surface and continue dropping, down into inky darkness. The water, however, was only two feet deep. I was soaked up to my armpits, but I was safe. "Eddie!" I shouted. "What the hell, man?"

"Shut up," he said. He was crouched at the edge of the hummock, his hand outreached to where my spear was floating. I dove for it, but Eddie was faster, snatching it out of the water. As I struggled to my feet, Eddie inspected the spear, his expression somewhere between interest and disdain. "Eddie," I said. He grabbed the spear at either end and brought it down onto his knee. The wood broke with a flat crack. "Hey!" I shouted. He flung the base of the spear to his right, and the top, my pocketknife still taped to it, to his left. The pieces spun off between the trees, each plunking somewhere out of sight.

"What did you expect?" Eddie said. "Good luck finding your way home." He turned and strode to the opposite end of the hummock, where he leapt between the birch trees to another hummock, and the one beyond that, ignoring my cries for him to *wait, wait, come on,* until he was lost amidst the trees.

The fury that burst from me was made worse by the realization that my jeans pockets was empty, the head of my Godzilla figure lost. Big: The emotion dwarfed anything I'd felt before. I was suspended in it, and it extended for miles around and below me, an ocean. For a second time, the swamp rippled, and I was conscious of that vast presence at the edge of my perception.

What happened next began as a thunderclap, a cataclysm of sound that rushed across the swamp toward me, blowing a wall of debris, of leaves and sticks and bark, ahead of it. I ducked to the water's surface, but I already

had seen what was following close behind, a wave that rolled through the water and the ground underneath, making the trees shake like grass in a breeze, snapping their trunks. The ground beneath me flexed like the hide of some great beast twitching at an irritant, vaulting me into the air. For a long moment, I hung in space, water around me, and then I struck the hummock on which Eddie had been standing. Winded, terrified, I lay there while trees continued to crack and splash into the water, which slopped and slapped against the hummock.

I was still there hours later, when the first firefighter stumbled across me. Before the earth had ceased shaking, my mother and Eddie's were on the phone to each other, asking if the two boys were at the other's house. They knew we were bound for the swamp, and they were horrified at the thought that the ground had started to move while we were within it. This was well ahead of the seismologists' determination that the epicenter of what they would describe as a substantial seismic event was located in the swamp—by my later estimates, about 150 yards south-southeast of where I'd been standing. In short order, our fathers were called, and not long after that, the police. Although damage to the buildings in the immediate vicinity of the event was in many cases substantial—the ceiling of the elementary school's gym fell in—injuries were remarkably few and mild, allowing the police to devote more resources to a pair of missing fourth-graders than might otherwise have been the case. One look at the wreckage that had been the swamp, and the cops called for whatever backup was available. A steady flow of firefighters, paramedics, and concerned men and women who'd heard the news on their CB's responded to the request. Someone laid their hands on a map of the swamp, and the people who'd gathered in the school parking lot, including my father and Eddie's, were divided into groups and assigned an area of the swamp to investigate. This was how I was found.

Eddie was not. The portion of the swamp I'd watched him heading toward fell, the ground in some places dropping as much as fifteen feet. Apparently there had been a network of caves immediately beneath the swamp, and when the earth shook, they collapsed, birthing a sinkhole that sucked down whatever was above it, including Eddie. Or so the theory went. Despite ten days of searching that included the use of backhoes to excavate select areas of the sinkhole, no body was recovered.

The Isleys moved a couple of months after the search was called off and their son declared missing and likely dead. During that time, they made no effort to contact me, to ask me about Eddie's last moments. I lived in dread that they might, and had invented a tale of Eddie running off for help after I twisted my ankle, in case I needed it. But I didn't have to use it, which was a relief. I wasn't certain I'd be able to maintain the requisite deception.

How did I feel? Relieved… and satisfied… and guilty. The last of those emotions was the only one to which I could admit. Without the other two, though, it was diagnosed as the survivor's guilt typical of a child who had undergone the experience I had. My parents, our parish priest, the therapist I was sent to, all offered versions of the same counsel: What you're feeling is normal, but what happened was not your fault. Only I knew how true and not true that statement was, and since I couldn't find a way to explain that to anyone, I buried it in my memory.

Time passed, years, decades. I continued to draw, continued to improve at it, made connections, and eventually got a job drawing comic books. I married, had a daughter who's almost finished college now. I left the publisher I'd been working for to join some people I knew who'd formed their own company. Eventually, we secured the rights to do a new Godzilla book. I'm going to draw it. Talk about a childhood dream come true, right? I made sketches, planned the first few issues with the writer. I had this idea that it would be fun to sneak a few of the locations I'd grown up with into the comic, so that when the monster's wading out of the ocean it's onto my favorite beach, that kind of thing. I sat down in front of the computer, called up Google Earth, and started typing locations into the search bar. I haven't been by the house I grew up in since my parents retired to North Carolina, and one of my sisters told me the old neighborhood had changed to the point that she barely recognized it anymore. I entered my childhood address and waited.

My sister was right: The old place was different. The field across the road had been replaced by a sprawling storage facility. Mr. Warner's house had been expanded to the rear, until it was almost twice its former size. There was a large, round pool behind the Isleys' former house. And so on. What drew my notice, however, as I scrolled up the satellite photo, was the swamp behind the school. Following Eddie's disappearance, it had been

fenced off, at no small cost to the local taxpayers. But there was no way it was going to be left open, especially when it was right behind an elementary school. No doubt, kids snuck in there; no doubt, stories sprung up about the boy who'd been lost there, consumed by the swamp. Do you know the official description of what occurred that distant afternoon is that it was an atypical seismic incident? Maybe the scientists never studied the satellite images of the area. Or maybe they did, and didn't notice anything: When I called my wife in and asked her what the picture on the monitor looked like to her, she leaned in, squinted, and said it didn't look like anything, just wetlands. She didn't distinguish the shape in what had been called a sinkhole. Thirty-five years later, its outline was still visible: the broad base, the three long channels branching off its top, the shorter channel angling forward on its left. It was the imprint of a foot, the foot of a creature whose head would have towered above my old neighborhood the way mine rises over the garden. I told myself I must be imagining things, imposing design on random destruction. But I could not unsee it, no matter how hard I tried. I leaned back in my desk chair, the head of that old, homemade Godzilla in my hand, and contemplated that shape for a long time.

What? Oh, that's right—I didn't tell you. When the fireman carried me out of the swamp, I had the head I was sure I'd lost clutched tight in my left hand. I have no idea how it came to be there. Afterward, I kept it with me as a kind of talisman, I guess. A few days after I bought my first car, I drilled a hole through the head and threaded it onto my key chain, which is where it's been ever since. Whenever I'm upset, agitated, or angry, I squeeze it. The green marker has long worn off, and the flesh tone underneath has faded to a dull color that my wife says resembles bone. Sometimes, if I'm dealing with a particularly annoying person at work, or if my wife and I are at loggerheads over something, or if my daughter is aggravating me as only she can, I clench that relic of distant catastrophe with such force, I half-expect it to push through my skin. I can almost feel what I did that day in the swamp, a vast presence, waiting.

Aphanisis

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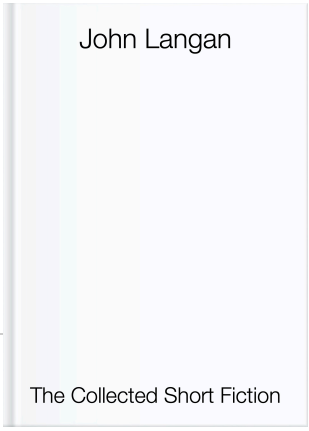

When he looks up, the child is standing in front of him, offering a glass of cloudy liquid that he supposes is water. Does it matter? He accepts the drink and, careful not to slice his lip on the jagged edge of the container, samples its contents. Though chalky, it's cold, and he gulps it down so fast his temples ache. Its coolness spreads through his throat and chest, makes him shiver. His breathing is still heavy, but not as labored as it was when he collapsed into a half-sit. Rising on one knee, he pushes himself to his feet, returning the empty glass to the child, who takes it and cradles it against her worn T-shirt.

The null-sword juts from the ground like some sinister Excalibur. He takes hold of its hilt and tugs it loose from the dirt. He has the impression he should feel more self-conscious about this, a grown man well into his middle-age, wielding a sword, and not just any sword, but one whose ornate guard and engraved blade lend it the appearance of a costume weapon, an artist's fancy. Yet he is not embarrassed in the slightest. If anything, grasping the sword gives him an almost primal comfort. And what better for slaying the products of the imagination, than a fantastical weapon?

(If you can say, that is, that the imagination and the unconscious are the same thing, which he's not sure you can. Certainly, they seem to be connected to one another, the imagination the mask the unconscious wears when it wants to make itself known. Certainly, too, the null-sword has proven effective at dealing with the unconscious's productions. He doesn't understand the exact mechanism by which it does this but he doesn't think it matters.)

A few meters away, the ground halts in a ragged cliff that extends to either side as far as he can see. He'd thought the edge of the world a figure of

speech, a way for the residents of Spittle to congratulate themselves on their assorted depravities and decadences: *We're as far as you can go; after us, there's only nothing*. Beyond the ragged margin of the dirt, however, is a gulf that reaches the limit of his vision, farther. It might be confused with outer space, except that there are no stars visible in its expanse, only vast ribbons of color that undulate into and out of visibility, occasionally intersecting one another and engaging in a twirling dance before rippling out of sight. Less frequently, great spheres of braided light flare into view and, as quickly, wink out. Once, there was a thunderous burst of sound like a chord played on an organ the size of the moon.

It shouldn't surprise him. After escaping the mines and making his way to Moosejaw, where he found the null-sword wrapped in burlap sacking in the back room of an abandoned grocery store, as the woman with the hole in her cheek had said he would, and after witnessing the weapon's effectiveness against the horde of sand-hobos that bushwhacked him outside of Spittle, he should have been prepared to find the literal edge of the world across the barren plain on the other side of Spittle's ash heaps. But it does, which may be why he finds himself monologuing to the child, who appeared at his heels as he was on his way out of the last of the dumps.

"The annihilation of consciousness," he says. "That was what I had decided upon. All the things that brought me to the mines—that made me think I deserved the mines, that they were a punishment I had earned, as if I were subjecting myself to a kind of personal justice, manufacturing justice by acting as if it was real—as far as I was concerned, all of those debts were long paid. I only wanted rest. But they—the overseers—would not permit me to die, which was perverse, bizarre, because plenty of other miners perished on a regular basis. Because I wanted it, because I sought it out, they thwarted me. I believe it amused them to do so. I suppose I should thank them for not allowing me to die before I met her, Merida. When I told her I was after the annihilation of my consciousness, she said, 'Yes, but what about your unconscious? What are you going to do about that?'

"After first, I thought her question absurd. The moment my consciousness was extinguished, I was certain my unconscious would be snuffed out, as well. No, Merida, said, I was treating the unconscious as if it were an adjunct to the conscious, when it was the other way around. The conscious,

she said, sits atop the unconscious like the penthouse suite of a skyscraper. Those top storeys could be removed, and everyone living beneath them would register some disturbance, and then continue with their routines. But, I said, I'll be dead: there won't be any place for those residents to live. They'll continue as information, she said. So will your consciousness, but that breaks down almost instantly. Your unconscious is made of sterner stuff.

"To be honest, it sounded as if she was talking about my ghost, but she said there were ways for this information to be accessed after my body had been mulched. There were rumors of a conglomerate in Wire who had worked out a means of collecting your residual information, distilling it, and injecting it, to trip through your unconscious. It was supposed to be a treatment for Black Dog, but she had her doubts.

"Why the prospect of someone ranging through my unconscious should have bothered me, I'm not sure. It's not as if I would be aware of it; although, I guess I might, in some strange way. It was more a case of, I had decided to erase myself from existence, and I meant to do so as thoroughly as I could. Merida took me to the pit-witch, who told me about this," he brandishes the null-sword theatrically, "and where to find it in Moosejaw. She also directed me here, where, she said, the proximity of the gulf would allow me to manifest the contents of my unconscious. Once they had been incarnated, the null-sword would destroy them completely, down to their information. As soon as the last of them had been expunged, I could complete my original plan safely.

"I don't mind telling you, I had a hard time believing the pit-witch. Everything she described sounded like it had been hacked from the plot of a Moorcock. After I escaped the enclave, I did head for Moosejaw, but that was because I figured the trackers wouldn't pursue me very far into it. I didn't expect to find the null-sword there, not really. Even holding it in my hands, I didn't know if it was what the pit-witch had said it was, a blade of irrational metal. It wasn't until I saw the sword in action that I realized the witch had been telling the truth; whereupon, I set out for Spittle, and the edge."

The child has wandered away a few paces, to the milky pool from which she scooped the water she gave him. Embarrassed at having been

abandoned by his audience, the man strides to the edge of the dirt and stops there. The drop off is steep, immeasurable. Gazing at the gulf, he allows his eyes to lose their focus. He doesn't try not to think. This, Merida said, was likely to be his principle danger. In trying not to think you wound up thinking about how you couldn't not think, and in so doing, blocked your unconscious. The trick, she said, must consist in remaining open—to his thoughts, to what was swimming underneath his thoughts—and to fashioning the openness into a space into which the denizens of his unconscious could be coaxed. Once they were contained, the peculiar energies of the gulf would act upon and manifest them. In his time at the edge of the world, he has learned to identify the particular sensation that heralds the beginning of the process, a fullness starting in his belly and reaching up to the top of his throat, as if he has consumed a large, rich meal that is not sitting especially well. As soon as the feeling has established itself, he retreats a safe distance from the dirt ledge and waits.

It never takes long. The fullness becomes a tightness. Sometimes the tightness remains centered on his gut; other times, it shifts to his chest, or his back. Once, it moved to the right side of his neck. The tightness becomes painful, as if the skin is being stretched to breaking from within. His nerves fire white hot. Since the first manifestation, he has continually promised himself that this time he will remain standing. He will not permit the pain to get the better of him. He has broken every one of those vows, dropping to his knees and then to his side, his eyes streaming tears, his jaw clenched, his breath hissing through his teeth. The tightness becomes a tearing, as if someone had worked a knife under his skin, taken hold of it, and begun peeling it off him, employing the knife to assist them. His nerves burn so hot, they're freezing, absolute zero. Amazingly, he does not lose his grip on the null-sword. He has the impression of something exiting his body, and the manifestation is accomplished.

Initially, his unconscious released versions of himself, alternate selves he'd long ago dreamed as his future. He found it surprisingly difficult to raise his weapon against them, especially the ones who understood what he was doing and pleaded with him not to. A couple of them had run. A heartening number stood and did their best to fight him. In the end, he cut every last one of them down, the effect of the sword's blows rendering their remains a

fine, colorless powder that the next breeze carried away. The unrealized selves were followed by versions of his immediate family members (his mother, young as she was when she sang to his childhood self in the back yard; his father, punctured and pierced by the machines that were keeping him from death), his close friends, favorite film characters, more distant family members, friendly acquaintances, favorite cartoon characters, and on and on through the multitude which inhabited his unconscious. So many, he had not thought his depths contained so many.

Eventually, the recognizable figures gave way, first to generic forms he realized must be early memories, when his child's brain lacked the context to identify a fireman in fire gear, or a clown, or the bishop in his regalia, and then to things at whose origin he could only guess, a figure made of bent and twisted wire netting, its head a tire whose treads opened in a cacophony of mouths, a thing like a short tree, its branches flowered by severed fish heads, their mouths gaping in idiot unison, a form that was little more than a collection of shadows and a sound like nails tapping on glass. Some, he fought for a minute, others, for an hour, a few for the better part of a day. At the end of each contest, he swung the null-sword down in an arc and slew his opponent.

The new adversary his unconscious releases wrenches itself from his gut and side and lower back, as it's been coiled half around him. He cries out, flailing the blade to back it away from him. There's no blood, no visible wound to his flesh, but the pain takes long enough to subside for anything with a notion to attack to do so. As soon as he can stand, before he's ready, he heaves himself up, the blade pointed at what's in front of him.

Through eyes still awash in tears, he sees what might be a centipede, if centipedes grew longer than a man. Its exoskeleton is dull grey, translucent; beneath its surface, schools of black squiggles like half-written letters stream. The creature's head consists of a cluster of heads taken from baby dolls. All are hairless, their eyes missing. At its other end, the thing dissolves into a puddle of greasy liquid. From somewhere, possibly the doll heads, the creature emits a clicking sound, like the spinning of plastic wheels. At the sight and sound of it, he feels what he's felt with all of the manifestations, no matter how bizarre, how repugnant: a deep sense of the

familiar. He shifts his grip on the null-sword, lowering the point, and adjusts his stance.

When the thing lunges at him, he steps to the right, slashing up and to the right, then pivoting to chop down. He retreats as the creature whips around after him. His blows have opened a pair of gaping vents in its armor, through which streams of black liquid swimming with black squiggles pour. The thing darts at him again, and this time he moves left, slicing a long opening in its right side, above the row of its long legs. As it twists after him, he spins and strikes the center of the dolls' heads. A trio of the heads goes spinning; clear fluid sprays from another four. Now he is the one pressing the attack, swiping at the creature's head to force it to rear. He cuts it just above the middle, bisecting it. The halves fall heavily, writhing. What had been a contest has turned to butchery. He severs the dolls' heads from the top section, slices it into three parts, and slices the bottom section into three. Once the creature begins to lose definition, its surface becoming pale, granular, he knows he is done.

There comes a moment, after he dispatches his unconscious's latest sending, when he pauses, sounding himself to determine whether his task is done, whether he has at last emptied the vast region below his conscious of its denizens. How many of them can there be? How many figures are necessary to populate the space? He would know, the pit-witch assured him. The moment his unconscious was clear, he would feel it. Then, it would be a matter of turning the null-sword on himself, and his quest would be completed.

He does not feel empty.

He sighs, wipes the sweat from his brow with the back of his hand. He looks around for the child, expecting her to approach with a fresh glass of milky water. She's nowhere to be found. The jar with the jagged lip rests beside the cloudy pool. He walks over, squats to take the jar and scoop the pool with it. The sediment in the water swirls, makes fantastical shapes.

I must be almost done, he thinks. *I have to be. How much can any person contain?*

The Underground Economy

Also known as *Underground Economy*

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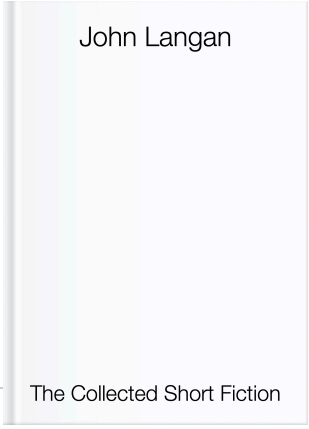


That's not what I want to talk about. If you're interested in hearing about the day to day of a stripper, there are plenty of books you can read. Some of them are pretty good. Or you could watch *Showgirls*. No, it's not accurate, but it's the kind of movie most of the girls I danced with would have made about themselves. So there's that.

It's a person—Nicole AuCoeur, the girl who told me I should try out at The Cusp, they were hiring and I could make some serious cash. I want to talk about her, about this thing that happened to her.

We weren't friends. We'd been in a couple of classes together at SUNY Huguenot. Both of us wanted to be writers. Nikki said she was going to be a travel writer. I was planning on writing screenplays. We took the same fiction-writing workshops, and were in the same peer-critique group. I read two or three of her stories. They were pretty good. The teacher was into fantasy, *The Lord of the Rings*, *Game of Thrones*, so Nikki turned in that kind of story. She was that type of student. Figure out what the professor likes and play to it.

I didn't know she was working at The Cusp. She was always late for class, and she always showed up stoned. She drenched herself in some kind of ginger-citrus perfume, to hide the smell, but it clung to her hair. She had long, brown hair that she wore in long bangs, like drapes. If anything, I thought she was some kind of dealer. I remember this one time, in the middle of class, she opened her purse and started to root through it—I mean, frantically, taking stuff out of it and piling it on her desk. The professor asked her if everything was okay. She said, "No, I can't find my stash." The guy didn't know how to respond to that. The rest of us tittered.

Anyway. I ran into her the summer after that class. I was sitting in Dunkin' Donuts, making lunch out of a small coffee and a Boston cream donut. Nikki sat down across from me. I hadn't realized she was still in town. I assumed she'd gone home for the summer. She said she'd stayed in Huguenot to work. I asked her what she was doing. She said dancing at The Cusp.

I blushed. Everyone knew about the club. It was on 299, on the way into town, a flat-roofed cinderblock building. We used to call it The Cusp juice bar, because they couldn't serve alcohol there, on account of the girls dancing fully nude. I hadn't known anyone who worked there—well, not that I was aware of—but I knew people who'd known people. Although what I'd heard from them had concerned the professors who were regulars at the place. There was a story about this one old guy who'd paid for a girl to come to his place and pee on him, so I guess I had an idea of the place as one step up from a brothel.

Nikki ignored my blush. She said the money was fantastic, and the club was hiring. If I was interested, there were auditions the following Wednesday. We made conversation for a couple of minutes, then she left.

To make a short story shorter, I tried out, was offered the job, and took it. Money—yeah, the money was better than I could make anyplace else in town without a college degree, and in a lot of cases with one. I had been working part-time as a cashier at Shop Rite, but I couldn't get enough hours to cover the rent, my car—which was a piece of shit that spent as much time at the mechanic's as it did on the road—and groceries. Not to mention utilities. And going out. My dad had wanted me to come home for the summer, and when I didn't, he got pissed and said if I wanted to stay in Huguenot so bad, I could find a way to pay for it.

So I did. I had to shave my crotch, which was no fun, and keep it shaved, to give the customers a clear view of what I was waving in their faces. The dancing wasn't, not really. It was wriggling around on stage, teasing I was going to undo my top, wriggling some more, removing my top with one hand but keeping my boobs covered with the other, wriggling some more, etcetera, until I was down to my shoes. Oh, and the garter the guys stuffed their dollar bills into. The air stunk of cigarette smoke, mostly from the dancers. All the same, I smiled at everyone. Not because I was enjoying

myself, but because it made me more money if the customers thought I was enjoying myself. It intimidated some of them, too, which did please me. I wasn't especially nervous working at The Cusp. Probably, I should have been. But I was sure I could handle any creeps who tried anything with me. My dad had been a marine, and a martial arts nut, and I had grown up knowing how to punch an attacker in the throat, tear off his ears, and gouge out his eyes. Plus, there were always at least two bouncers in close proximity, in case things in the private rooms got seriously out of hand.

That was where the real money was. Private dances. Lap dances, mostly, which were forty dollars for five minutes plus whatever you could convince the guy to tip you. Some girls could keep a customer in there for two or three dances in a row. I didn't, not usually. There was also a room at the back of the club, the Champagne Parlor. Two-fifty for half an hour with the girl of your choice. And a complimentary bottle of non-alcoholic champagne. That was mainly for the guys whose buddies had brought them to The Cusp for their bachelor parties.

Nikki was the queen of the private dances. She had this routine. The DJ would announce her as "Isis," which was the stage name she used. (Mine was Eve. I know: subtle, right?) She would walk out onto the stage in a long, transparent gown that trailed along the floor behind her. She danced to Led Zeppelin, "The Battle of Evermore." I think she'd studied ballet at some point. There were a lot of ballet moves in her routine. She stood on one leg and held the other leg out in front of her, or behind her, or to the side. She skipped across the stage on the tips of her toes. She half-crouched, leapt, and came down in another half-crouch. She twirled, sometimes on her toes, her arms stretched above, sometimes with one leg bent behind, her head thrown back, her arms curved in front. The gown floated after, whipped around her. She let it drift away. Underneath, she was wrapped in scarves, each of which she undid and sent fluttering to the floor. Throughout, she went from customer to customer, bending towards them, giving them a closer look at what lay beneath the remaining scarves.

By the end of the song, all she had left on was a pair of fairy wings. I guess that's what you'd call them. They were like something from a Halloween costume, one for adults. Sexy Tinkerbell or whatever. A pair of clear straps looped them around her shoulders. They weren't that big, and they were

made of thick plastic. When the lights played over them, they filled with a rainbow of colors that slid about inside them like oil. Something to do with the plastic. They weren't butterfly wings, which is what most fairy costumes come with. They were long, narrow, shaped like blades. Hornet wings, or an insect from that branch of the family. If I thought about them that way, they almost freaked me out. Nikki danced stoned—she did everything stoned, from what I could tell—and the glaze the pot gave her eyes made them resemble the hard eyes of an insect. Together with the wings, they lent her the appearance of an extra from a grade-z sci-fi flick, *Attack of the Wasp Women* or something.

None of the customers noticed this. Or, if any of them did, he had a kink I don't want to think about. Nikki never danced more than one song. As Zeppelin faded away, she was off the dance floor, followed by one and sometimes two guys. Most of them went for lap dances, which took place in one of a row of booths set up opposite the club's bar. Yeah, the juice bar. The booths were basically large closets with small couches in them. The customer reclined on the couch, and the dancer did her thing. Each booth had a camera mounted high in one of its corners. For the safety of the dancers, supposedly, and to ensure no one went from lap dance to out-and-out hooking. Part of the bouncers' jobs was to keep an eye on the video feed; although I never saw any of them cast more than a glance in the monitors' direction. I don't think Nikki ever unzipped anyone's jeans, but there's a lot you can do before you reach that point. To be sure, as far as tips went, none of the rest of us could keep up with her.

Not that she was stingy with her money. If it was a night the club closed early, a bunch of us would head into one of the bars in town, and Nikki would cover our drinks. If we were working a late night, once the last customer was out and the front door locked, she'd produce a bottle of Stoli for us to mix with the juice bar's juices. Those times—sitting around the club, shooting the shit—were better than being at an actual bar, more relaxed. Most of us changed into our regular clothes, jeans, T-shirts, wiped the makeup off our faces. Not Nikki. She stayed naked as long as she could. Except for her wings. She wandered around the club, a drink in her hand, the wings bouncing up and down with each step, clicking together. She would lean against the bar, where I was sitting with a cup of coffee because

I had an 8 a.m. class I'd decided to stay awake for. We didn't say a lot to one another. Mostly, we traded complaints about the amount of reading we had to do for school. But having her beside me gave me an opportunity to study the tattoo that decorated her back, so I did what I could to keep to keep the conversation going, such as it was.

That tattoo. All of the girls had ink. In most cases, it was in a couple of places, the lower back and the shoulder, say. That's where mine were. I had a pair of coiling snakes on my back, and the Chinese character for "air" on my right arm. There's a story behind each of them, but they're not part of this story. One girl, Sheri, had ink on most of her body, brightly-colored figures that were enacting an enormous drama on her skin. Nikki had a single tattoo, a square panel that covered most of her back. It was difficult to see clearly, warped by the plastic wings lying over it. The artist had executed the image in black and dark blue, with here and there highlights of pale yellow and orange. There was a car in the middle of it, an older model with a narrow grill like the cowcatcher on a train. The headlights perched high on either side of the grill. The car stretched along a foreshortened road, its rear wheels and end dropping behind the horizon. I wasn't sure if the distortion was supposed to represent speed, or just an extra-long car. To the right of the car, a cluster of tall figures filled the scene. There were five or six of them. They were dressed in black suits, and black fedoras. Their faces were the same pale oval, eyes and mouths empty circles. To the left of the car, a steep hill led to a slender house whose wall was set with a half-dozen mismatched windows. Within each frame, there seemed to be a tiny figure, but I couldn't make out what any of them were. A rim of orange moon hung over the scene in a sickly smile. The picture had been done in a style that reminded me of something from *Mad* magazine, exaggerated in a way that was more sinister than comic. It fascinated me. I asked Nikki what it was supposed to be. She said, "Oh, you know, just a picture." Which could have been true, for all I knew. At the same time, that was a lot of investment in a random image.

The customers didn't mind it. Not that I heard, anyway. Most of them were too timid to say anything. They acted as if they were cool, confident, but it was obvious they weren't. It was as if they were tuning forks, and our bare skin was what they'd struck themselves on. They vibrated, made the air

surrounding them quiver. There were exceptions, sure. One guy who was a long-haul trucker. Not too big. Kept his hair short, his beard long. Had on a red flannel shirt every time he entered the club, which was about once a month. He was quiet, polite, said, “Yes ma’am,” “No ma’am.” But there was a stillness to him. It was what you’d expect from a wolf, or one of the big cats, a tiger. The utter focus of a predator. That I know, he hadn’t tried anything with any of the girls before I started at The Cusp. He behaved himself while I was there, too. If I’d heard he owned a cabin in the woods, though, whose walls were papered in human skin, I would not have doubted it. I gave him a lap dance, once, and spent the five minutes planning the elbow I’d throw at his temple or throat when he grabbed me. He didn’t, and he tipped pretty well. That said, I wouldn’t have done it a second time.

The other exception was a group of guys who squeezed into the club one Thursday night. There were five of them, plus a man who said he was their driver. The bouncer who was working the front door said he saw them pull up in a white van. The five guys were huge, the biggest men I’d ever seen in person. I’m going to say seven feet tall, each, three feet and change wide. Three fifty, four hundred pounds. All dressed in the same khaki safari shirts, khaki shorts, and sandals. They had the same style crewcuts that squared the tops of the heads. Their faces were blank, unresponsive. They stared straight ahead, and didn’t so much as glance at any of the girls. In the club’s mix of white and blue lighting, their skin looked dull, gray. They could have been in their early twenties. They could have been twice that. They stood beyond the front door in a group and did not move. They reminded me of the stone heads on Easter Island. They weren’t still—they were inert.

Not their driver, though. He was smaller—average-sized, really. It was standing in front of his passengers that made him appear diminutive. He was wearing a beige, zip-up jacket over a white dress shirt with a huge collar and brown bell-bottom slacks. His hair was black, freshly-cut and gelled, but his skin had the yellow tinge of someone with jaundice. He was younger pretending to be older. I figured he was in charge of the five guys. Actually, what I thought was, the five passengers were residents of one of the local group homes, and the driver had decided to treat them to a night out. I know how it sounds, but things like it happened often enough for it not to seem strange, anymore.

The driver didn’t waste any time. He spoke to the front door guy, who pointed him to the bartender. She leaned across the bar to hear what he had to say, then motioned to one of the girls who was killing time with a cranberry spritzer to fetch someone from the dressing room. I read her lips: Isis. Nikki. The driver nodded at the bartender, and passed her a folded bill. I’m pretty sure it was a hundred.

Nikki emerged from the dressing room wearing her assortment of scarves, but without the long gown. She looked across the club to where the driver was standing with his hands in his trouser pockets. Her head jerked, as if she recognized him. When she walked up to him, she kept her expression neutral, which only seemed to confirm that she knew the driver. He tilted forward to speak into her ear. Whatever he had to say didn’t take long, but she took a while to respond to it. She stared at the driver, as if trying to bring him into focus, then nodded and said, “Sure.”

Apparently, what the driver wanted was a lap dance for each of his five passengers, all of them provided by Nikki. He gestured for the nearest of the huge guys to come forward. Nikki took hold of one enormous hand and led the guy to the middle lap dance booth. He had to stoop to enter it; I wondered if he’d fit inside. He did. His four buddies didn’t register his departure in the slightest. The driver stationed himself midway between the rest of his passengers and the booth. He gazed into space, and waited.

I didn’t see Nikki emerge from the booth with the first giant in tow, because I’d been called to the dance floor. It took me two songs into my three-song routine to sell a customer a private dance. He was a college student. I almost thought I recognized him from one of the big lecture classes. He was free with his money, and it wasn’t difficult to keep him in the booth for two dances. We were to the right of Nikki and whichever of the enormous guys she had with her. The walls of the booths weren’t thick. All kinds of sounds leaked through from the adjoining spaces. That center booth, though, was silent. I noticed this, but I don’t know if it seemed strange to me or not. I’m not sure. I was busy with the college student. I want to say that there was something off about that lack of sound. It was as if it was a gap in sound, a blank spot in the middle of a song, rather than the end of it.

Nikki and I finished our dances at the same time. I didn’t notice anything wrong with her, then, standing naked outside the booths. She was flushed, but she’d been working hard for almost thirty straight minutes. She was sweaty, too, which was odd. The club was air-conditioned, in order to keep the dancers’ sweat to a minimum. I wondered if the driver was going to ask for his turn, next. He didn’t. He passed Nikki the biggest roll of bills I had and have ever seen, collected his giant cargo, and exited The Cusp without another word. Nikki gathered her scarves from inside the booth and retreated to the dressing room.

She didn’t stay there long. She dropped the scarves on the floor, stuffed the roll of money into her purse, and returned to the club. The first customer she approached was a middle-aged guy wearing gray slacks and a white button-down shirt. He was sitting back from the stage, so he could watch the show and not have to pay out too much cash. Nikki straddled him in his chair and ground her pelvis against him. Whatever prudence he’d imagined he possessed flew out the window. He trailed behind her to the lap dance booths.

A minute later, he was screaming. The booth’s door flew open, and Nikki stumbled out of it. There was blood all over her legs, her ass. She stopped, found her balance, and walked toward the dressing room. As she did, her customer emerged, still screaming. The front of his slacks was dark with blood. Of course I assumed he’d done something to her. His face, though. He was wide-eyed, horrified. One of the bouncers was already next to him. I went to check on Nikki.

She was bent over one of the makeup tables, attempting to roll a joint. The backs of her legs, the cheeks of her ass, were scarlet. Closer to her, I saw that her skin had been scraped raw. It reminded me of when I’d been a kid and wiped out on my bike, dragging my palms or shins across the blacktop. The air smelled coppery. Blood ran down Nikki’s legs and pooled on the floor. Blood flecked the bottoms of the plastic wings, the tattoo. She wasn’t having any luck with the joint. Her hands wouldn’t do what she wanted them to. I pushed in beside her and rolled the spliff as best I could. I passed it to her with fingers that weren’t trembling too much, then held her lighter for her.

I didn’t know what to say. Everything that came to mind sounded inane, ridiculous. Are you hurt? Her legs and ass looked like hamburger. Do you need a doctor? Obviously. What happened to you? Something bad. Who were those guys? See the answer to the previous question. I couldn’t look away from the ruin of her flesh. When I’d started working at The Cusp, I’d thought that I was entering the world as it really was, a place of lust and money. Now I saw that there was a world underneath that one, a realm of blood and pain. For all I knew, there was somewhere below that, a space whose principles I didn’t want to imagine. I mumbled something about taking her to a doctor. Nikki ignored me.

By the time one of the bouncers and the bartender came to check on her, Nikki had located her long gown and tugged it on. She checked her pocketbook to be sure the roll of cash was there, took it in the hand that wasn’t holding the joint, and crossed to the fire exit at the opposite end of the dressing room. Without breaking stride, she shoved it open, triggering the fire alarm. She turned left towards the parking lot as the door clunked shut behind her.

The bouncer, the bartender, and I traded looks that asked which of us was going to pursue her. I did. I hurried along the outside of the club and across the parking lot to where Nikki parked her Accord. The car was gone. I ran back towards the building, which everyone was pouring out of. I could hear a distant siren. Most of the customers were scrambling for their cars, hoping to escape the parking lot before the fire engines arrived and boxed them in. I considered making a dash inside for my keys and was brought up short by the realization that I didn’t know where Nikki lived. I had an approximate idea—the apartments down by the Svartkill—but nothing more. I could drive around the parking lots, but what if she’d gone to the emergency room, or one of the walk-in care facilities? I didn’t even have her cell number, another fact which suddenly struck me as bizarre. Why couldn’t I get in touch with her? Why didn’t I know her address? The strangest sensation swept over me there in the parking lot, as if Nikki, and everything connected to her, had been unreal. That couldn’t have been the case, though, could it? Or how would I have found out about the job at The Cusp?

I didn’t see Nikki for the rest of the time I worked at the club. I stayed through the end of the fall semester, when I graduated early and moved,

first back in with my dad, then down to Florida. The five enormous guys, their jaundiced driver, didn't return during those months. The customer whose pants had been soaked with Nikki's blood did. Less than a week later, he appeared at the front door, insisting he had to talk to her. His face was red, sweaty, his eyes glazed. He looked as if he had the flu. The bouncer at the door told him that the girl he was looking for no longer danced here, and no, he didn't know where she'd gone. The guy became agitated, said he had to see her, it was important she know about the cards, the hearts. The bouncer placed his hands gently but firmly on the guy's chest and told him the girl wasn't here and he needed to leave. The guy broke the bouncer's nose, his right cheek, and three of his ribs. It took the other two bouncers on duty to subdue him, and they barely managed to do that. The cop who answered the bartender's 911 call took one look at the guy and requested backup. The cop said they would transport the guy across the Hudson, to Penrose Hospital, where there was a secure psych ward. As far as I know, that's what happened. I don't know what became of Nikki's last customer, only that I didn't see him again.

Years went by. I left Florida for Wyoming, big sky and a job managing a bank. I bought a house, a nice car. The district manager was pleased with my performance, and recommended me for a corporate event in Idaho. I took 80 west to Utah, where I picked up 84 and headed north and west into Idaho. Somewhere on the other side of Rock Springs, a white van roared up behind me and barely avoided crashing into the back of my rental. I swore, steered right. The van swung wide to the left, so sharply it rose up on its right wheels. I thought it was going to tip over, roll onto the median. It didn't. It swerved towards me. I should have braked. Instead, I stomped the gas. The rental surged past the van. As it did, I glanced at the vehicle's passengers. Its rear and middle seats were filled by a group of enormous men whose crewcut heads did not turn from the road ahead. In the front seat, a driver with black hair and yellowed skin laughed uproariously along with a woman with long brown hair. Nikki. Together, she and the driver laughed and laughed, as if caught by an emotion too powerful to resist. He wiped tears from his eyes. She pounded on the dashboard.

I pulled onto the shoulder and threw the car into park. My pulse was hammering in my throat. I watched the van speed west down the highway

until it was out of sight. I waited another half hour before I shifted into drive and resumed my journey. The remainder of the drive to Idaho, and all of the way home, I didn’t see the van. But I was watching for it.

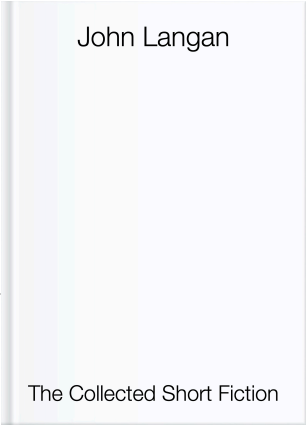
I still am.

The Communion of Saints

First published in *Giallo Fantastique* (May 2015)
Also published in *Children of the Fang and Other Genealogies* (August 2020)

Not yet available in this collection.

The Open Mouth of Charybdis



First published in *Innsmouth Nightmares* (July 2015)

You know how the story ends before it's even begun. No one had any memory of my brother, Edward, except me. Instead of five children, three boys and two girls, my parents had an equal number of sons and daughters. Photos in which Edward was sandwiched between our brother, Henry, and our sister, Jane, now showed Henry and Jane smiling beside one another. Drawings for which he had won the CYO art contest year after year, their accompanying gold medals, were gone from their position in the hallway, with no difference in the paint to mark where they'd hung. The silver maple in the backyard, whose trunk Edward had attempted to saw through, as revenge for Jane falling off one of its lower boughs and breaking her arm, showed no grooves at its base. Henry and I shared a room in which each of us had a single bed, not the bunkbed and single bed the three of us had argued over for years. Our room was still too small for all our possessions, but without Edward's drawing table filling one of its corners, there was space for a bookcase for me and a desk for Henry.

More had changed, besides. It seemed I was the artistic one now, while Henry was the academic prodigy. Jane was suddenly famous for her stubbornness at the dinner table, and Victoria, the youngest, was known for her intense Catholicism. Gone were my years as a wide receiver for my high school's junior varsity and varsity football teams. Gone was Henry's ability on the guitar. Gone was Jane's facility with foreign languages, Victoria's knack for the mechanical. Our parents were different, too. Dad was no longer a manager at IBM, which meant he was home earlier, but the family budget was tighter. Mom was prone to more and worse migraines, spending her days behind a pair of large sunglasses. Four kids still meant a busy household, but there was a current of melancholy threading through

our relations, impossible to account for, almost as if it was a collective response to an absence no one was aware of.

My younger brother vanished from existence while the family was on a trip to a place of which there is also no trace. Ask the rest of them where we passed the last week of July, the first of August, during the summer of my senior year of high school, and they will tell you Maine, a town called Bucksport, on the Penobscot River. They'll describe day trips to Bar Harbor, to Acadia National Park; they'll talk about the night our parents took us to dinner at Jed Prouty's, the nicest restaurant in town. None of them will have anything to say about spending the same two weeks north of Boston, in and around Gloucester. They won't recall taking the train into Boston to visit the Aquarium. They'll have no recollection of driving through Newburyport to the village of Mason, on the northeastern end of Plum Island.

But we did, all of it. We went on a whale watch out of Gloucester, and Mom became seasick, and had to take a Dramamine and lie down on one of the ship's benches. We followed the walkway that wound up and around the Aquarium's enormous cylindrical fishtank, waving to the divers floating within, feeding the fish. We parked in Mason's single municipal lot, which was located next to its dilapidated docks, and Edward, Henry, and I set off in search of the Marsh House, the museum Edward had asked to visit, because it had a small painting by Paul Gauguin, with whose art he was obsessed. Our parents, who elected to browse the waterfront's abbreviated row of shops with our sisters, told us to meet them back at the car in two hours, which seemed like more than enough time. The village was little more than a few dozen narrow streets, and the museum was not far. At seventeen, I was in charge of Henry (fifteen) and Edward (fourteen), a position I made certain to verify with our parents. "Just behave yourselves," Dad said.

Although open to the public, the Marsh House was a private museum. It had been founded by the family who had given what was actually a mansion their name. Four stories tall, red brick with white trim, the residence had been built in the Federal style. It stood, simple and austere, amidst a scattering of large trees on the ocean side of the island, at the dead end of a cobbled street whose sidewalks had buckled with the decades'

weather. A threadbare lawn stretched from the house's back door to the short drop off to the shoreline. The three of us walked to its edge. Amidst the rocks crowding the sand, a half-dozen posts, broken and weatherbeaten, marked points on a line receding into the waves. The remains of the family's private dock, Edward said. According to him, the Marshes had been one of the major families in Mason during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. That was when the village had gone by a different name, Innsmouth.

"Why'd they change it?" Henry said.

"Some kind of disease broke out in the early thirties," Edward said, "or maybe it was the late twenties. Whatever it was was pretty bad, virulent. The place was quarantined; there were actual soldiers stationed on the road to keep people out."

"Or in," I said.

"Yeah," Edward said. "Something else went on, too, about the same time. Government raids—like, the F.B.I.. The village used to be a lot bigger. The docks extended pretty far over the water. There were a lot of warehouses built on them—houses, too, like, half the village. The federal agents were interested in the warehouses. Supposedly, they arrested a lot of people."

"Smugglers," I said. "Had to be."

"Could be," Edward said. He turned, and Henry and I followed him around to the front of the house and the museum's entrance. A kid somewhere in our age range, wearing an oversized Red Sox jersey and perched on a tall chair, raised his eyes from the swimsuit issue of *Sports Illustrated* he was lingering over and asked how many. I said, "Three." As I did, I heard a tremendous crash, as if two enormous gears had clashed together. The kid, his chair, the wall behind him, were suddenly clear, transparent, as if made of glass. Through a series of ghostly layers, I glimpsed the lawn behind the mansion, the ocean. Head wheeling, I jerked my hand to my eyes. Behind me, Edward said, "What is it?"

"Nothing," I said, because what else was I going to say? I lowered my hand, hoping I'd spoken truthfully.

It appeared I had. The kid, the house, were once more solid. Whatever had just happened to me was, to put it mildly, disorienting, but Edward gave me

no time to dwell on it. Pushing in front of me, he asked where the Gauguin painting was. The exhibit was on the main floor, the kid said, in the dining room, which was located on the ocean side of the museum. He pointed us to a stack of photocopied guides sloping on top of a low table across from him. Next to the folded sheets sat an undersized caricature of a pirate's treasure chest with a slot through its lid and the word DONATIONS stenciled on its side. Henry extracted a couple of crumpled dollar bills from the front pocket of his jeans and pushed them through the slot, which guilted me into doing the same. Edward was already off ahead of us, making his way into the house.

Though high-ceilinged, its rooms were smaller than its exterior implied. Each one was crammed full of what I assumed was its original furniture, plus a selection of objects associated by a common theme. The first room we entered was decorated with a dozen ships in bottles, the containers ranging in size from a small, green-tinted medicine bottle to a large, clear bottle whose contents would have served a sizable dinner party. All of the model ships were sailing vessels, two and three masters. I didn't see their names anywhere on the bottles. The bottled ships went with the harpoons leaning against one corner of the room, the cutlasses laddered on the wall opposite. An assortment of sextants and compasses covered the top of one side table, while a collection of carved pieces of what I thought were bone had been laid on top of another. "This was how the Marshes made their fortune," Edward said, "on the sea. They did some piracy during the Revolution, and some whaling later on, but mostly, they were into trading."

Neither Henry nor I doubted Edward's information. Especially when he wanted to go someplace, do something, he researched it as thoroughly as if he were going to present a lecture on it—which he often did to Henry and me, and sometimes to our sisters. Henry said, "What did they trade?"

"All kinds of stuff," Edward said. We followed him into the next room. Sitting on its high-backed chairs, a pair of complete suits of samurai armor greeted us. A sheathed katana spanned the knees of each one. A folding screen whose panels were painted with koi had been positioned slightly behind the chairs and their armor. More swords were displayed on the room's walls, alongside elaborately embroidered kimonos whose flattened

sleeves reminded me of pressed flowers. Clusters of side tables held sets of china cups, saucers, and plates. “All right,” Henry said, “this is pretty cool.”

“Yeah,” I said.

That room opened onto a hallway which ran left toward the back of the mansion. Sneakers squeaking on the floor’s polished wood, the three of us passed portraits of old and old-looking men and women, wearing the fashions and expressions of a century or more in the past. “Hey,” Henry said, “you didn’t finish telling us why they changed this place’s name.”

“Oh,” Edward said, “no big mystery. The village never recovered from the epidemic and the government raids. Did I mention the fire? There was a big fire—maybe in 1942? Burned almost all of the docks, the warehouses, pretty much everything over the water. People thought the Germans had set it—you know, saboteurs, on account of the war. There was some kind of massive chemical spill—something that had been stored in one of the warehouses. It poisoned the sea pretty far out. Things kept going downhill until the late sixties, when there was a move to revitalize the area, bring it back to prosperity. As part of that, the local officials decided to change the name to Mason, which was what the English called it when they first wrote about it. They cleaned up the shore, which was full of wreckage from the fire, and knocked down pretty much all the remaining piers, which weren’t in great shape. I guess it worked for a little while, but there wasn’t anything out here you couldn’t find in Newburyport. Unless they have a specific reason to visit here, people don’t.”

“Like a ghost town,” Henry said.

“A ghost town that can’t disappear,” Edward said. “Although, there’s a story—”

The rest of the sentence stayed in his mouth, kept there by his first sight of the painting that met us when we turned right at the end of the hall. The picture had been propped on an easel, set up near the French doors that gave a view of the back lawn and the ocean. The mid-afternoon light pouring through the glass was the only illumination in the room; though I noticed a row of track lighting on the ceiling whose lights were all turned in the painting’s direction. A pair of short brass poles held a thick purple rope to mark the limit of our approach. Despite them, the effect of the display was

casual, as if the artist might have stepped away from the canvas only a moment or two before.

The painting itself was smaller than I was anticipating. Since it was a work by a famous artist, I assumed the piece would be at minimum the size of the portraits we had just passed, three feet or so high, two feet or so wide. This picture was half as large. It showed a beach scene, done in the simple lines and rich colors that defined Gauguin's later style. At its center, a figure executed in dark blues and black stood on a slight sandy rise, its thin arms held to either side, palms out. Its head was an exaggerated oval, the eyes blank, the features heavy, and was crowned with a pair of wings that swept down behind its torso. At its feet, a trio of figures lay on their sides, their backs to the viewer, their arms and legs tucked in front of them in what could have been positions of birth or death. Their skin was pale white, ruddy in places. Below them, a pool of water, possibly an ocean inlet, was busy with dark green and yellow reflections that suggested forms swimming beneath its surface. In the distance behind the blue figure, the ocean rolled in white waves from left to right, toward a yellow shore curving to receive them.

What drew the eye, however, more than the strange blue form, which I assumed was either an idol or a priest, or the patches of green and yellow, which appeared to outline figures whose arms and legs were long, serpentine, was a patch of canvas to the right of center. There, what had been a tall figure rendered in dark greens and yellow-white had been smeared until unrecognizable, apparently by someone who had taken a cloth soaked in turpentine or a similar fluid and done their best to rub out whatever had been painted there.

Almost simultaneously, Edward said, "There it is," and Henry and I said, "What happened to it?"

"It was defaced," Henry said.

"No duh," I said. "Who did it?"

"I don't know," he said. "No one's sure. Gauguin himself never said that much about the picture. He was living in Tahiti when he painted it. He had finished this huge painting, one he called, *Where Do We Come From? Who Are We? Where Are We Going?* It was supposed to be his magnum opus, his

crowning achievement as an artist. He told a couple of friends he was going to commit suicide once it was done. According to Gauguin, he kept his pledge. He went into the mountains, took some arsenic, and lay down so, he said, the ants could have him."

"Obviously," I said, "he didn't."

"Or the poison didn't work," Edward said, "which was what he said had happened. Supposedly, when he realized he wasn't going to die, he wandered down to the beach and saw…something."

"What?" Henry said.

"He didn't say," Edward said. "But he returned to his home, located a piece of canvas, and set to work on this painting. He was done in a week. In part, that was because he recycled elements from an earlier painting, *Day of the Gods*. That one has the same composition, the idol in the middle of the beach setting. *Day of the Gods*, though, is full of people, mostly women, and they're all part of a celebration of the blue idol, the god. There's all kinds of symbolism in it, but it's basically a happy painting. This one…" He shook his head. "Not so much."

"What's it called?" I said.

"*What the Sea Gave*."

"Who's the blue guy supposed to be?" Henry said.

"Gauguin called him an image of the Beyond," Edward said. "I read one critic who said he represents a Polynesian god whose name I can't remember. I read another guy who said Gauguin had transplanted the figure from a Buddhist temple he'd seen somewhere. He's some kind of divinity."

"Why is he holding out his hands like that?" Henry said.

Edward shrugged. "Beats me."

"It looks like he's separating things," I said, "keeping them apart."

"Could be," Edward said.

"What about the damaged part?" Henry said.

"There's no mention of anything wrong with it in Gauguin's letters," Edward said, "which you'd think there would be if anyone had defaced it

while he was still alive. Although…most of the stuff he painted, he sent to Paris to be sold. It doesn't seem like he did that with this picture."

"Could he have rubbed out the spot?" I said.

"I guess," Edward said, "but you wonder why he wouldn't paint over it, or trash the painting, if he felt that strongly about it."

"How did these guys get hold of it?" I said, "The Marshes?"

"Their ships were pretty busy in that part of the world. Somehow, after Gauguin died, the painting found its way onto one of their vessels. It had been wrapped in brown paper, with no destination written on it. It ended up in one of their warehouses here, where it stayed for years, until someone decided to take a peek under the wrapping. The family wasn't sure what to make of it; a few more years passed before a guy from the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston came to examine it and tell them what they had. For a long time, they kept the painting to themselves, until they decided to turn their old home into a museum, and realized the picture could be an important part of it."

"Huh," I said. For a moment, the three of us stared at the canvas. I was struck by its physicality, by the brushstrokes visible at the edges of the figures, by the minute rises and falls of the paint's surface, by the furious spiral someone had rubbed into the picture. "What do you think was there?" I said to Edward.

"I don't know," he said. "Maybe another idol, like the one in the middle."

"Huh."

We didn't stay much longer. On our way out, we checked the closet-sized gift shop, where the kid in the Red Sox shirt sold the three of us cheap plastic samurai swords and Edward a postcard reproduction of the painting. As we meandered toward our rendezvous with our parents, Edward said, "It's funny: when the Marshes were sailing all over the globe, there were crazy stories about them having made a deal with the Devil—but, like, a sea-Devil. Wouldn't it be weird if that was what Gauguin had painted, a sea-Devil?"

The reply I was about to offer was cut off by a blast of sound. The same grinding noise I had heard in the museum roared in my ears. At the same

time, everything around me, the flat-faced houses, the narrow sidewalk, the potholed main street, lost its color, draining to transparency. I looked for my brothers and saw Edward beside me, translucent, the distant ocean visible through him. A feeling of immense helplessness swept over me, as if something crucial had buckled within me. I knew Henry must be behind me, but I didn't want to turn around, in case he too was fading, and in case, in the time he was out of my sight, Edward disappeared completely. Already he, the surrounding buildings, the street, were filling with light, as if the sun had reached the exact position in the sky necessary for its rays to catch on them. My ears, my skull, rang with the slow clashing and crashing of titanic gears, of machinery vast enough to turn the sky above. Edward blazed with a brilliance that forced tears to my eyes. I fought against closing them, because I knew with terrible certainty that were I to do so, the instant I opened them, my brother would be gone.

In the end, I did close them. They shut themselves, despite my best efforts, the pain overriding my intentions. The enormous sound continued for what felt like hours, concluding sharply, as if those gigantic gears had locked into a new position. I waited with my eyes closed until the echoes of the noise had subsided enough to admit other sounds, the boom and hiss of the surf on rock, the cries of gulls overhead, the murmur of distant voices. I opened my eyes to the great rocks of Acadia National Park jutting out into the Atlantic's waves, to white birds hanging in the breeze, to families and couples picnicking on the rock around me. Along with the new surroundings came knowledge of the new life of which they were part. I call it new, but I apprehended this existence as the unbroken record of my experiences to that point. Except that, layered beneath this life was another, which intersected it in some places, diverged from it in more, the most significant of which was Edward, who had been erased from my family completely.

That night, I dreamed about him. I had been quiet the long car ride back to the house my parents had rented, which I explained with an appeal to too much time in the sun. After dinner, I sat with my (diminished) family while we played cards at the kitchen table and listened to WBZ out of Boston on the radio. I lost a couple of hands of gin rummy before excusing myself. My face was flushed. I felt feverish, and took the ibuprofen my mother

recommended. For a short time, I lay in my bed, listening to my parents and (one) brother and sisters continuing the game, then dropped into unconsciousness.

My dream occurred within the painting we had viewed in the Marsh House. Edward was there, but he appeared as one of the figures in the picture, his features simplified, stylized, his hair a mass of shifting color. Behind and to his left, the blue god held its hands to either side, palms-out. Behind and to his right, a dark smear in the air occulted something whose eyes were too big and a deep, fiery yellow. The joy that rushed through me at the sight of my brother—however strange that sight might be—was tempered by unease at the veiled form.

Smiling, Edward said, “You’re here.”

“Of course,” I said.

“They hid it,” he said.

“What?”

“The town, Innsmouth. Changing its name wasn’t enough. The problems were too extensive. They decided more drastic measures were called for.”

“Who did?”

“The Marshes. And others.” He gestured at the dark patch in the air.

I kept my gaze from it. “What—”

“You don’t need to know. They helped, that’s all.”

“Helped with what?” I said.

“Shifting the village. They excised it from this space and hid it in others.”

“Others? What others?”

“Stories, mostly, although a couple of novels and some comics, too. A few paintings, movies. They used the zones that are created when you’re reading, or watching a movie, those imaginative locations. They figured out a way to align enough of them to hold the village and its residents. There’s a lot of higher math involved; I don’t understand most of it.”

“But what about you? You didn’t live there.”

“I got caught in the process. It’s like these guys created a whirlpool in space and time, and I was standing too close to it. The same thing happened

to a lot of people—to a lot of things, too. All of us dragged out of our old lives and washed up in a new one."

"I'll save you," I said. "Hang on. I'll work something out."

"It's too late," Edward said. "At least, I'm pretty sure it is. Reality—your reality—has already been rewritten. I bet you have a whole new set of memories—a whole new life, don't you?"

"Yeah, but—"

"Is everyone okay? Mom, Dad, Henry, the girls? Are you okay?"

"Yes," I said, and knew it was substantially true—as true as it had been in our previous existence, the one Edward had shared. The statement's truth, of course, depended on me ignoring the fact of my brother's disappearance.

"Well," Edward said.

"Where *are* you?" I said. "I still don't understand. Are you all right?"

"It's different," Edward said. "There are things, here…"

"What?" I said, "What things?"

He nodded toward the form obscured behind him. "It's awful," he said, his voice flaring with anger. "It's worse than anything I could have imagined. And I think I love it. God forgive me, but I do."

Those were his final words to me. He did an about-face, and started walking in the opposite direction. As he drew up next to the disturbance in the air, a hand stretched out of the tumult. The fingers were long, with too many joints, capped with talons. The skin was rough, dark green spotted with whitish patches like blooms of algae. I thought it was trying to grab him, and went to shout a warning. But without looking at it, my brother, my now hopelessly lost little brother, raised his hand and took hold of the monstrous one, much as he had caught my hand when we were younger, and he was afraid.

Shadow and Thirst

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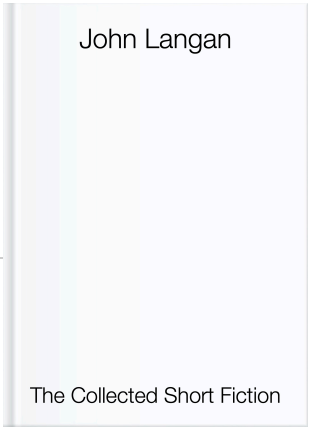


The tower was there when they returned from their early-morning dog walk. August saw it first, squatting in the meadow at the foot of the hill behind his father and stepmother's house. It was round, dun colored, maybe ten feet high, ten wide. "Hey," he said, "what's that?"

Tony, his father, looked up from Orlando the pit bull, who was rolling in the damp grass, grunting happily. "What?"

"Down there." August pointed. "That's still your property, right?"

"All the way to the stream and halfway up the other side." Tony squinted; he wasn't wearing his glasses. "That looks a bit too elaborate for your little brother to have built by himself. Huh. Guess I'd better have a look at it. You want to come, Officer?"

August had yet to decide whether his father's use of his job title was ironic or conciliatory, a sign of displeasure at his decision to drop out of college and join the Newark city police department or an indication of Tony's acceptance of his choice. "Sure," he said, "let's check it out."

"It's probably something the neighbors' kid put up," Tony said. "The boy's quite the budding filmmaker; we've let him shoot a couple of his movies here. I played King Arthur in one of them. I bet this is connected to his latest project. Come on, Orlando." He tugged the dog's leash. Orlando snorted and twisted to his feet.

When they started down the hill, however, the dog planted his feet firmly and would not move. "Orlando, come," Tony said. "Come on, big guy, move." Orlando whined and pulled backward. "Orlando," Tony said, more sharply. "Orlando, come!" In response, the dog's whines were succeeded by a chain of high-pitched barks, almost yelps.

"Man," August said, "he does not like that thing."

“Apparently,” Tony said.

“You want me to take him inside?”

“If you wouldn’t mind,” Tony said, passing him the end of the leash. “I’ll go check out the round, squat turret.”

“The what?”

“It’s from a poem by Robert Browning, ‘Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came.’”

August nodded at the dog, who was straining toward the house. “Doesn’t look like this Roland read it.”

Tony laughed. “Just as well. Things don’t turn out so well for the guy in the poem.”

“Give me a minute and I’ll come with you.”

“Don’t worry about it. I think Rebecca said she was making waffles. Get started and I’ll join you in a minute.”

“All right, Professor,” August said. He watched his father start toward the prop, a heavyset, middle-aged man wearing white karate pants and a white T-shirt, his bald spot pinkly visible through the hair he kept long to conceal it. Unexpectedly, August’s throat was tight, his eyes burning. *What the hell?* But before he could answer his own question, Orlando lunged in the direction of the back door, almost yanking him off his feet. “Okay, okay,” he said to the dog, “we’re going.”

Inside the house, Orlando didn’t wait for his leash to be unclipped; instead, toenails clacking on the tile floor, he scrambled through Tony’s office to the kitchen. Dressed in a fuzzy purple robe and pink pajamas, her curly hair gathered in a bun, Rebecca, Tony’s second wife, was whisking batter in a white ceramic bowl. Orlando danced around her. “Good morning, baby,” she said, craning her head toward him. “What was all that barking about? Did you see a squirrel?” Orlando dropped at her feet. “Hi, August,” she added.

“Good morning,” he said, moving past her to the refrigerator, from whose top shelf he removed the orange juice.

“Where’s your dad?”

“He went to check out something at the foot of the hill. Actually, that was what set Orlando going. Someone put up a building down there.” August stepped to the other side of Rebecca and took a glass from the cupboard.

“A building?”

“It’s for a movie. That’s what Tony thinks.” He placed the glass of orange juice on the kitchen table and returned the carton to the fridge. “He said one of your neighbors shoots his films on your property.”

“Nate, yes.” She nodded. “Last summer, he constructed a small castle in the meadow.”

“Well, maybe he’s making a sequel, because he built a tower this time—not much of one, really, just a single story. Tony called it a round, squat turret.”

“That sounds like your father.” Rebecca wiped the whisk off on the rim of the mixing bowl and placed it in the sink, then plugged in the waffle maker. “Ever the teacher.”

“He said it was from a poem by Robert Browning.”

“One of his favorite poets. He taught a special topics course on him a couple of years ago.”

“Who’s one of Dad’s favorite poets?” Forster said. At ten, August’s half brother had already left behind pajamas for gray sweatpants and a red Minecraft T-shirt.

“Robert Browning,” August said.

“Oh.” Forster went to the cupboard for a plastic cup.

“So how do you like police work?” Rebecca said. She opened the waffle maker and ladled batter into it.

August shrugged. “It’s okay.”

“You’re keeping safe?”

“As much as I can.”

“August,” Rebecca said, “those kinds of statements do not fill me with confidence. I know Newark’s a dangerous place; I want you to tell me you’re being careful in it.”

“Have you shot anybody?” Forster said.

“Forster!” Rebecca said.

“What?” He finished filling his cup with white grape juice. “I was only asking.”

“My firearm has remained in its holster,” August said. “Fortunately. Which is not to say there haven’t been a few times I thought I might have to draw it.”

“Really?”

Rebecca’s frown stalled the anecdote forming on his lips. “Nah, not really.”

“Awww,” Forster said.

“I figure I’ll stay in Newark for a few years, then see about going federal.”

“The FBI?” Rebecca said.

“What’s the FBI?” Forster said.

“Or the US Marshals,” August said.

“*FBI* stands for ‘Federal Bureau of Investigation,’” Rebecca said to Forster. “They’re like the police, only, they work for the government in Washington, DC.” To August, she said, “I imagine the benefits are great.”

“Oh yeah,” he said, “but you may have to move around a lot, which I’m not sure how I feel about. It’s the same thing with the Marshals.”

“You’re young. You should see the country. Besides, it would give us the excuse to visit you wherever you’re stationed. Is that what they say, *stationed*?”

“I think it’s *assigned*.”

“Right. So make sure you’re assigned somewhere nice.”

“Okay,” August said. “Any requests?”

“I’m still lobbying for your father to take me to Hawaii,” Rebecca said.

“Can you go to Wyoming?” Forster said.

“Wyoming?” August said. “What’s in Wyoming?”

Forster shrugged. “I don’t know. I just want to go to Wyoming.”

“Fair enough,” August said. “I’ll see what I can do, buddy.”

Forster smiled into his juice.

Throughout their conversation, as the smell of warm vanilla threaded the air, Orlando had remained at Rebecca's feet, his eyes lifted to her while she prepared breakfast, his tongue darting out to lick his lips and nose. All at once, he was up, his eyes on the back door, a growl rumbling his chest. Rebecca looked down at him and said, "What's—" but the rest of her question was drowned out by the barks that burst from the dog. These were not the anxious yelps Orlando had voiced earlier; these were deeper, louder, full of the same aggression that was evident in the dog's stance, legs squared, quivering; chest out; heavy head forward. He'd positioned himself between Rebecca and the back door, which, August saw, his father was pushing open. There was just enough time for him to register something different about Tony, something off, and then Orlando sprang from his position and in one snarling bound was on the man.

Rebecca and Forster screamed simultaneously, she, "Orlando! Tony!" he, "Dad!" She stepped toward the back door, which Tony had been forced most of the way out of by Orlando, who scrambled up him, tearing his clothes with his claws, snapping at his neck and face. August ducked in front of his stepmother, trying to work out how he was going to haul eighty pounds of pit bull off his father. Maybe the dog's collar…

His hand was almost at the blue band when he heard a pair of sharp cracks, like wet branches being snapped, and Orlando's snarls gave way to howls. Something was still growling—*Tony?* It wasn't the dog, whose wails continued as August's fingers hooked his collar. Before he could pull Orlando away from Tony, there was a tearing sound; the dog's cries were swallowed by a liquid choking, and Orlando flew against August with sufficient force to knock him off his feet. His head smacked tile. Stars flared in front of his eyes, dissipated in time for him to see his father leaping over him into the kitchen. Rebecca said, "Tony?" and screamed.

August rolled Orlando off him, noting as he did the splintered bones protruding from the dog's forelimbs, the great, bloody hole in Orlando's not-inconsiderable throat. Tony was standing with his back to him, bent forward, his arms out. Rebecca had retreated to the other side of the kitchen table, where she'd grabbed Forster from his chair and had pulled him against her. Her face was bloodless white, Forster's wide-eyed, tearful. "What happened to Dad?" Forster said. His mother answered with a groan.

Tony clearly heard the squeak of August's sneakers on the floor behind him but didn't turn fast enough to evade his son's tackle. The impact carried both men stumbling across the kitchen, Tony's right arm sweeping the waffle maker and bowl of batter into the sink. August caught the shoulders of his father's T-shirt and wrenched them to the left, steering Tony into the refrigerator with a crash. Tony rebounded into August, forcing his left hip into the kitchen table's nearest corner. Though dimmed by adrenaline, the pain was enough to loosen August's grip on his father, who twisted around, swinging his left hand in a sloppy backfist that scraped August's ear. Now that it was plainly in view, August saw that there was indeed something wrong with his father's features, beyond the blood and bits of flesh smeared around the mouth. It was as if he were looking at Tony's face in a smashed mirror, the particulars arranged in cubist angles. He was sufficiently startled not to track Tony's left hand coming back the other way for a punch to the jaw that jolted August's head. He released his hold on Tony entirely, striking his hip against the table a second time as he stepped back. *Who knew the old man could hit so hard?* For that matter, who knew he could rip out the throat of the family dog with his teeth?

August's hand trailed over the plate set out for him as Tony rushed at him. One of the good plates that Rebecca brought out whenever he visited, it shattered against Tony's head, driving him to August's right. August pivoted and snapped his right fist into Tony's solar plexus. With a hoarse gasp, Tony collapsed against the sink, his eyes bulging. August considered a follow-up chop to the neck, to the vagus nerve, but the combined plate to the head and shot to the midsection appeared to have quieted whatever had animated Tony. His legs had given out, and unable to prop himself up on the sink, he sagged to the floor. His face was still different—wrong—but August needed to call 911 before worrying over it.

Obviously, his father had suffered a psychotic break and required immediate medical attention. The cordless was in its cradle on the other side of the refrigerator. He lifted the phone with a hand suddenly trembling so violently the device almost slipped from his fingers. In an instant, the shaking spread to the rest of his body, accompanied by a combination of nausea and dizziness. He leaned against the fridge, closing his eyes to keep from vomiting at the bloody mess that was his father, the ruin of Orlando

beyond him. The coppery stink of blood mixed with the vanilla odor of the waffles. From somewhere behind him—the bathroom, he guessed—he heard Forster murmur, Rebecca hush him. August swallowed, called out, "You guys okay?"

"We're all right," Rebecca answered. "Are you?"

"I'm okay," August said. "A little shaken up, but all right."

"Is Tony…" She let the remainder of the question hang.

"He's…" August glanced at his father, slumped at the base of the kitchen counter, his pants and T-shirt torn and soaked with blood, his chest heaving as he struggled to breathe. "I have to call 911," August said. "He's okay, but we have to get him some help. I want you guys to stay where you are for the moment."

"Did you kill my dad?" Forster's voice was high, frightened, full of tears waiting to spill.

"No," August said, "I just… subdued him. But he's okay, buddy, I promise. I'm going to phone for an ambulance, all right?"

"All right," Forster said. "What about Orlando?"

August grimaced. "I'm not sure. He's hurt pretty bad."

Forster wailed, his cries ringing on the bathroom's tiles. "Shhh," Rebecca said.

The 911 operator was brisk, efficient. There would be help at the house shortly, she said. August was reasonably certain he remembered a firehouse nearby; all that remained was for him to keep an eye on his father and offer what assistance he could to the EMTs when they arrived. He returned the phone to its cradle, thinking that the remainder of his visit was going to be radically different from what he had anticipated. Once Tony was on his way to the hospital, August would have to tend to Orlando's remains, carry the dog outside if he could, cover him if he could not, in either case, do what he could to ensure that Forster was not confronted with the sight of his dog's mutilated corpse. No doubt, Rebecca would want to be at whatever hospital accepted Tony, even if, as August suspected, his father was headed for a locked ward. He couldn't imagine she would want Forster with her, but neither could he picture her leaving his younger half brother here, amid the

bloody wreck of Tony's rampage. Something else that would have to be seen to—

Faster than August would have predicted possible, Tony heaved himself onto his feet and ran for the back door. He was through it by the time August was halfway across the kitchen. *Son of a bitch.* The old man was full of surprises today, wasn't he?

At the threshold, at the top of the four stairs that led down to the back lawn, August paused, sweeping his gaze from side to side. If Tony still had his sights set on Rebecca and Forster, then he might feint, lead August outside while he circled to the front door and gained readmittance to the house that way. But no, there he was, racing down the hill behind the house, in the direction of the neighbor kid's prop. Had he been in uniform, standard procedure would have dictated August remain where he was until help arrived. He weighed doing so. Through the woods beyond the meadow at the foot of the hill, wasn't there another house? Hadn't Tony and Rebecca complained about its owners allowing their dog to roam off-leash, provoking Orlando? By the time the help August had requested appeared, Tony could be done with his neighbors and their wandering dog.

Cupping his hands around his mouth, he turned toward the kitchen. "Tony just ran out of here," he called. "I'm going after him. There's help on the way; someone should be here in a minute. Don't come out until they arrive."

Without waiting for an answer, he leapt down the stairs and sprinted after Tony.

His third week in the academy, one of August's instructors—Officer Bennett, a tall, sparse man in charge of the recruits' daily exercise—had delivered a speech about running. *The first time someone runs from you,* he had said, *and they* will *run, because they see you're new, or because they panic, or because they are, in fact, guilty of something—that first chase, you* must *catch them. If you do not, word will get around—word will* fly *around—that you can be outrun, and in short order, every time you approach anyone, they will take to their feet. You cannot permit that to happen.* August had taken the instructor's words to heart, adding a two-mile run—the last fifty yards of which he sprinted—to his daily workout. In the seven

months since he had graduated the academy, the extra training had served him well: in fourteen foot chases, including one through the aisles of the enormous IKEA near Newark-Liberty, he had not been beaten once. Even with his father's head start—even with his hip throbbing from its collisions with the kitchen table—August had little doubt he would catch him, and quickly, at that.

Tony, however, proved to be fleeter of foot than August would have predicted of a man his age and with his physique. Already, his father was two-thirds of the way down the back hill, his apparent destination the short tower in the meadow. How was the old man doing it—any of it? The blows he'd taken should have kept him on the kitchen floor. Conceivably, he could have regained his feet, but for him to cover ground like an Olympic sprinter seemed beyond the realm of possibility. Yet there Tony was, drawing closer to the prop while August barreled downhill in pursuit. Whatever had broken in Tony's mind, it had opened reserves of fearsome strength. August thought of the tube of pepper spray clipped to his car keys, lying on top of the dresser in the guest room, and wished he'd brought it with him.

As Tony approached the tower, he veered left. Once beside it, he turned right and plunged into the structure. August slowed, waiting to see whether his father would come hurtling out of the prop the same way he'd gone into it, crash through the opposite side, or remain within. Tony had to know he was behind him, didn't he? How could he not?

While he was still a good ten yards from the tower, August circled right. From the top of the hill, the prop had appeared amateurish, if ambitious, a frame wrapped with heavy brown paper whose surface had been covered with hundreds of rectangles executed in black Magic Marker. Seen up close, the structure was considerably more substantial and impressive. It consisted of at least one layer of actual bricks, laid together with a neatness that suggested extensive workdays for something this size. The bricks were composed of reddish-brown material that gave the impression of incredible age, an effort August guessed might have been produced with the use of certain tools, which added to the amount of time it must have taken the neighbor kid—and his assistants, surely—to build it. How could Tony and Rebecca have missed it for so long? How could Forster have failed to notice it?

Coming around to the place where Tony had disappeared into it, August saw a narrow entrance in the brick. No doubt it was a consequence of the morning sun, which saturated the air with hazy brilliance, but the doorway to the tower appeared too dark, as if the kid had draped it with a thick black cloth. August walked all the way past the opening, but no matter what angle he surveyed it from, the aperture remained impenetrably dark. Had he not witnessed Tony passing through it, he would have been tempted to assume it was painted on. Tony was likely concealing himself to either side of the entrance, seeking to evade, and possibly ambush, August.

If his father was waiting for him to charge in after him, however, his wait was going to be a long one. Standard procedure in a situation such as this one, where Tony was safely contained—alone—within a building with a single doorway, was to remain outside and wait for backup, and that was exactly what August intended to do. Once properly equipped officers were on scene, August would apprise them of the situation and they could decide how best to proceed. He had not yet picked a spot at which to station himself when the screaming started.

It poured from the doorway, a single ragged note that extended long past the limits of what August would have judged possible. August jumped as the scream was succeeded by another, and another, the cries echoing on the tower's brick, lingering, so that each new scream overlapped the ones that had preceded it, strata of pain. He couldn't discern whether all the screams were Tony's. He recognized the tones of his father's voice in certain of the cries, but others sounded different, distinct. *Oh, Christ, is there someone else in there with him?* If there was, then SOP did a one-eighty and you entered the building in question immediately.

Of course there was something wrong with it, with all of it. The time span didn't work. From the construction of the tower in the first place, to Tony's abrupt and catastrophic psychic collapse, to his father's bringing a third party into the tower and hurting them sufficiently to drag the screams of the damned out of their throat, the last thirty minutes' events should have required much longer to happen. Tony and Rebecca should have been walking to the top of the hill to watch the neighbor kid build his tower for weeks on end, and Tony's mental break should have been forecast by warning signs for at least as long. (Shouldn't it? August was no expert in

the psyche; that was his mother, and at the moment, he could not consult with her.) As for Tony's kidnapping someone and dragging them to the tower—that, too, should have been a lengthier process.

Unless this had been occurring for more time than August had realized. Perhaps his father had been sliding into madness for weeks, months. Tony could have put up the tower on his own, with the neighbor kid available as a convenient explanation. After the structure was done, he could have brought someone to it… no, none of that worked, either. Rebecca was on sabbatical this semester, making it difficult for the kinds of activities he was imagining Tony engaged in to have escaped notice.

Whatever explanation arranged the morning's details into coherence, it would have to wait. The screaming was now a chorus, blending its agonies. Although he had assumed Tony was lurking to one side or the other of the door, the screams called into question that assumption. Wherever the old man was waiting, August was going into the tower.

For a moment—an instant—as he was rushing across the threshold, August had the sensation of striking and passing through a liquid, as if the doorway framed a fall of black water. By the time he was reacting, clamping shut his mouth, attempting to conserve whatever air remained in his lungs, August was on the other side of the entrance, inside a room whose brick walls and dirt floor were bare, near the top of a flight of stairs that corkscrewed into the earth. A circular opening in the ceiling admitted sunlight into the space; none appeared to have followed him through the door. The knot of screaming wound up the stairs; August hurried down them.

There had been, he thought, a wellhead at the foot of the hill, in the tower's approximate position. During August's first visit here, Tony had pointed it out to him, a concrete tube a foot and a half high, three feet in diameter, with a lid that extended another couple of inches all the way around. There was a spring in that spot, Tony had said. The old guy who had owned the property before them had dug out the spot, gone down ten, fifteen feet, poured concrete walls to keep it from caving in. Once he was finished, he had a well for the garden he planted in the meadow, and for himself and his family, should they ever have need of it. Tony supposed it was a good resource, though it became a hazard during the winter, when a decent

snowfall transformed the hill into a sledding course for Forster and his friends. He and Rebecca had not figured out what to do about the thing.

August felt reasonably sure that excavating the well further and installing a set of stairs would not have been among his stepmother's choices. Already, August had descended at least fifteen feet, the air dimming as he went. Where had Tony found, or stolen, the time for such a project? The stairway had been cut into the rock below the shallow topsoil, each step topped with a flat slab of stone. It was difficult to picture his father hefting slab after slab into place; although, was it any more extraordinary than Tony crippling and killing an angry eighty-pound pit bull with his bare hands and teeth?

But that wasn't the point: in truth, neither action made sense in relation to Tony, to the existence he and Rebecca and Forster had here. Yes, that was what the family members of criminals always said, wasn't it? Not my father/son/brother/whatever. This was more than the standard denial, though. The rock of the stairway's walls was smooth, polished as if with the passing of many hands over it, and not the rough surface of recent excavation. The screams below rang off it, almost seemed amplified by it. The air was dry to the point of parched, rather than the heavy damp of a well. All of it was more of the wrongness August had recognized outside the tower, a kind of warp to everything that he felt as a pressure behind his eyes, an ache in his molars.

The stairs ended in an archway cut in the rock. While the light had faded to a faint glow, August's vision had adjusted to it, which allowed him to distinguish the tunnel opening in front of him. From somewhere within the thicker darkness farther down the passage, Tony and whoever was with him continued their screams. August wasn't certain how long they'd been screaming—probably not as long as it seemed—but surely, his father and the other person or people should have screamed themselves hoarse by now.

Trying to move slowly enough for his eyes to grow accustomed to the steadily diminishing light, but quickly enough to reach Tony and his companions, August stepped through the archway and moved along the tunnel. In low light, peripheral vision picked up a lot of the slack: was it Tony who'd told him that? He thought so. It sounded like the kind of quasi-interesting fact with which his father had peppered their phone conversations during the middle stretch of August's adolescence, when he'd

been angry at Tony all the time, for not staying married to August's mother, for agreeing to her having full custody of him, for staying in New York while he and his mother moved to Pennsylvania. Tony would deliver some nugget of information, and if August didn't snarl at him, his father was off and running, stretching that nugget into as much more conversation as he could manage. The tactic had served its purpose, which was to keep the two of them talking, and subsequently, August had proved an asset during trivia night at the bar he and a few of his fellow officers frequented.

And here was his peripheral vision kicking in, showing the walls to either side of him carved with a series of unfamiliar characters, each the size of his hand. Most of them were combinations of loops and swirls that wrapped around and doubled back on themselves, forming arabesques whose precise design defeated his passing glance. In their midst, however, he found a pair of simpler characters, a circle, broken at about nine o'clock, and a square whose interior was filled by a line that drew in toward its center in a series of right turns—a maze, he thought. Both the incomplete circle and the maze repeated at irregular intervals. With so little light, and his ears crowded with screaming, it was difficult to be sure, but the characters did not appear recent. He trailed his right hand over the wall; the edges of the figures were even with the surrounding rock.

August was losing track of the number of details for which he was unable to account. Could all of this, the stairs, the passageway, the carvings, have been here before Tony and Rebecca had bought the place? Had his father ever verified that what he'd been told was a well was, in fact, a well? Why would he have, though?

Ahead, the tunnel branched left, right, and straight on. Screams poured from each opening. August leaned in each direction, attempting to locate the source of Tony's cries. *Left?* He couldn't decide. *Pick one. Left.* He turned and started that way.

Almost immediately, the air was clouded with a stench that forced him back a step, coughing. He had smelled it previously, when he had assisted a raid on a drug house out near the airport. The three guys who ran the place had suspected one of their regular customers of being a criminal informant. The guy wasn't, but his general twitchiness had appeared to belie his protestations to that effect, with the end result that two of the dealers had

tortured him to death with a pair of carving knives. Afterward, there had been great pools of blood, which one of the murderers had had the inspired idea of using a wet-vac to clean up. This had worked reasonably well, except that the men had not gotten around to emptying the blood, so when August and his fellow officers swarmed the house five days later, the wet-vac was sitting in a corner, full of something that swished suspiciously. That something, as the cops found out once one of them unclipped and removed the lid, was spoiled blood. Already, August had smelled some foul odors on the job, but this was especially vile, rotting meat mixed with copper. It was a point of pride with him that he had not vomited, but he alone knew what a close thing that had been.

That same smell hung around him now. The orange juice he'd drunk earlier boiled at the back of his throat. He swallowed, continuing forward. *Oh, Tony*, he thought, *what did you do?* Maybe it was an animal. *Please let it be an animal.*

It was not. Dressed in filthy rags, the man was lying on the opposite side of the modest chamber into which the tunnel emptied. From a small hole in the middle of the ceiling, a shaft of light stabbed the floor. August blinked at its brilliance. Ten feet away, the heat it threw off raised sweat from his skin. August circled to the right, keeping close to the room's brick walls. Undiminished, the screaming continued. The man in front of him had been the victim of incredible violence, his chest split open, ribs broken and pushed to the sides as if for some brutal anatomy lesson. The heart was missing, the object, presumably, of whoever had exposed it in the first place. At some point in that process, the assailant had splashed the man's blood on the walls, from which it had run down into puddles that had darkened and decayed. Estimating time of death was not part of August's job, but it was plain the man had been here for, at minimum, several days.

Which meant nothing good, as far as Tony was concerned. Not to mention Rebecca and Forster: how would they react to learning that the man they loved had committed such a savage murder? Sick at the prospect, August leaned against the wall to his right. The slight change in perspective this produced brought into focus the dead man's face, tilted up and back, the mouth open in a final cry, the eyes bulging, and August saw that the corpse sprawled at his feet was that of his father.

His heart kicked. Everything in him seemed to rise up, as if threatening to exit his body through the top of his head, then to drop, carrying him to the floor. His mind was a blank, all other thoughts blown to its margins by Tony's ravaged body. That blank, he understood a moment later, was a grief so immediate and profound it doubled him over, flooding his eyes with tears, forcing sobs from his lips. No matter that one part of his brain had resumed the this-doesn't-make-sense complaint (as the blood demonstrated, the man in front of him had been dead for days, at least; even if there were another explanation for that detail, August should have heard the sounds of his father's murder, despite the screaming that vibrated the air). Tony's corpse made all of that seem inconsequential, irrelevant.

August had wondered, upon occasion, what his response to the death of a family member would be. It was the catalyst in so many of the crime and police dramas he had watched growing up—the hero's wife or husband or mother or father is killed, often in a horrifying manner, and in response, the hero seeks out and has revenge upon those responsible. While it was possible that, later on, he would be overcome by the desire for vengeance, all August wanted right now was to remove his father's remains from this strange and terrible place. He wiped his eyes, his nose, used the wall to help himself to his feet. His legs wobbled. If he crouched, he could slide his hands under Tony's back to his armpits, hoist him up from behind and half carry, half drag him out that way. Not the most graceful method, but it would allow for the gaping wreck of Tony's chest.

The arm slipped around August's throat and was dragging him backward almost before he knew it. Strong—it was monstrously strong, its muscles tight against his neck as it squeezed. August didn't bother grabbing for the hand. His feet were still on the floor. He backpedaled hard and fast, going with the choke, overbalancing his attacker. His assailant's feet slipped and he went down, pulling August with him. August twisted as he fell, gripping his left hand with his right to brace the left elbow he drove into his attacker's ribs. He heard a grunt, another when he brought the elbow in a second time. His assailant's grip had slid, placing his right hand in easier reach. August seized it with both of his hands and twisted it off him, maintaining his hold on it as he scrambled to his feet, yanking the arm straight and torquing the wrist into a lock. His attacker cried out. August

kicked him in the ribs he hoped were already broken. “Who are you?” he shouted. “Why did you kill my father?”

The man moaned.

August applied more pressure to the joint lock. “I will snap your goddamned wrist,” he said.

“August,” the man said.

“How do you know my name, huh? Did he”—he flicked his head toward Tony’s body—“tell you before you cut out his fucking heart?”

“August,” the man said.

“Do not say my name,” August said. “Who are you? Why did you kill my father?”

“August,” the man said, “it’s me.”

Though his voice was hoarse with pain, some note in the man’s words caused August to stare at his face more intently. Both the man’s long beard and ponytail were white, and his nose looked to have been broken at least once, but August recognized Tony looking up at him—albeit, a Tony from twenty, twenty-five years in the future. The room around him appeared to shimmer, but August retained his grip on the man’s wrist. He stole a glance at the dead man. As surely as he could tell from where he was standing, it was Tony lying there. August looked at the man who had choked him. The resemblance was uncanny. “Who are you?” he said.

“It’s me, Tony,” the man said.

“Sorry,” August said, “you’re about two decades too old for the part. Try again.” He pressed the man’s wrist.

The man grimaced. Voice tight, he said, “The last big fight your mother and I had—the two of you had moved. I came down for the weekend to see if we couldn’t work things out. We couldn’t. She told me she was going ahead with the divorce. I accused her of lying to me, of leading me on. She was standing at one end of the dining room table. I was near the front door. You ran out of your bedroom, which was on the other side of the kitchen. How long you had been listening, I’m not sure. You were in your short pajamas. Your face was red; you were crying. You screamed at the two of us to stop it, which I guess we did. Afterward, I came to see you in your bedroom

before I left. You were inconsolable. I kept telling you it was nothing to do with you, I just had to go, but you knew better. You knew everything had changed."

"Jesus." August released the man's hand, stepping away from him.

"I know." The man he could not yet think of as his father struggled to stand. Clothed in a loose gray shirt and black pants, the slight curve in his spine worse, he was thinner than August had ever known him, as thin as he'd been in some of the old photos he'd shown August. His eyes, though—his eyes were the same steel blue. Rubbing his side where August's elbow and foot had found it, he said, "I've thought about how I would explain all of this to you if I had the chance. There was a quotation I was going to use, from Stevenson, *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*: 'I hazard the guess that man will be ultimately known for a mere polity of multifarious, incongruous, and independent denizens.' It seemed perfectly applicable to me, but I wasn't sure if you'd agree on the relevance."

"Oh my God," August said, "it is you." His vision doubled, blurred; he swayed drunkenly. The screaming seemed to be happening inside his head as much as outside it.

Tony's hands were on his shoulders. "Hey," his father said, "hey." August's mouth opened, but there were too many questions, tripping over one another in their haste to be asked. "I understand," Tony said. "It's a lot to absorb. Nor is this the worst of it."

"I don't understand."

"Would you come with me so I can show you something?" Tony dropped his hands from August's shoulders.

"What?"

"It's better if you see it for yourself." Already, Tony was backing toward the doorway. "I'm not going to try to hurt you," he added. "I only did that as a, a… precaution. You'll have to forgive me. I've been down here a long time."

"You didn't recognize me?"

"It took me a moment," Tony said. "I'm sorry. Come this way." He spun on his heel and exited the room.

Staying in place was hardly an option. August followed Tony out of the room into darkness and cool, the short distance to the junction of the four passageways. There, Tony turned left. This tunnel sloped steeply down. Whatever faint remnant of the sun's glow had accompanied August's initial progress was long gone, despite which, he could discern the general details of the passage, whose walls bore the same weird graffiti he'd observed earlier. In fact, it was these markings—the Möbius characters, the broken ring, the maze—that were responsible for what illumination there was. They didn't glow; rather, so black were they that they caused the surrounding darkness to appear lighter, as if they were drawing it into themselves. The air was dry and full of screaming.

"Who is that?" he said.

"Who's what?"

"Doing all the screaming."

"Oh. That's me. And others."

On the right, the tunnel wall was interrupted by a succession of rough openings, each about five feet high by three wide. Tony stopped at the fourth and ducked into it. Mindful of his head, August went after him.

The space into which they emerged was more cave than proper room. Approximately circular, it was illuminated by a series of holes drilled in the center of its high ceiling, through which beams of phosphorous-white light slanted to the floor. The odor of dust mixed with that of rotten blood. The cave's circumference was studded with ledges and outcroppings, a dozen of which supported human bodies. As far as August could discern, every one of the figures was in the same condition as the one he'd discovered in the smaller room, the chest wrenched open, the heart taken.

Nor did the resemblance end there. "Come." Tony waved him to the right, where the nearest corpse lay prostrate. Were Tony not standing in front of him, he would have identified the man dead on the rock shelf as his father. Dressed in worn and bloodied karate pants and a torn white T-shirt, he appeared far closer in age to Tony as August had last seen him than did the white-haired figure watching for his reaction. August cleared his throat and said, "If I checked the other bodies in here, they'd all look like this one, wouldn't they? Like you."

“They would.”

“You realize how fucked-up this is.”

Tony frowned. “Language.”

“Seriously?” In spite of the body broken and violated before him, of the ever-increasing horror of the entire situation, August laughed. “Since when did you become such a prude?”

“Since I spent twenty years in here,” Tony said, flinging his hand to take in the cave and what lay beyond it, “in the tower.”

“How is that possible?” August said. “How is any of this?”

His father leaned against the outcropping that held what appeared to be the corpse of his younger self. “This place, the tower, is a prison. Except it’s also the prisoner. Never mind that part. The point is, it contains an extremely dangerous man. To be honest, *dangerous* doesn’t begin to cover it. Nor does *man*, for that matter. The tower houses a monster, and I mean that in the most literal way. It was a man, once, a long, long time ago. Now he’s more shadow than flesh, shadow and thirst. As long as he thirsts, he suffers terribly. Whenever he satisfies his thirst, he earns a respite from his pain.”

“What’s he so thirsty for?”

“Blood—human blood.”

“You make him sound like a—”

“Like a vampire, yes.”

“Fuck,” August said. “No fucking way. I mean—just—fuck.”

This time, Tony did not reproach his cursing. “After everything you’ve seen—after me…”

“Jesus, Dad,” August said. “Why—ahh, shit.” He could feel his lip quivering, his eyes growing moist.

“I’ll take the ‘Dad,’” Tony said.

The chorus of screaming went on. After a moment, August said, “You were saying.”

“The… prisoner can’t leave the tower, so he has to wait for someone like me to come blundering into it. Complicating matters for him, the tower

doesn’t remain in one place for any length of time. It shifts, changes location every few minutes. Based on what I’ve learned, I believe it moves through time as well as space. Though I may be mistaken. Regardless, what this means is, the prisoner’s victims are few and far between. He has to find a way to… prolong each one. To this end, he employs a device. It resembles a full-length mirror, but its surface is black. The prisoner positions his victim in front of it, and the mirror splits part of them off. Not an arm or a leg, but a self. One of that multitude of selves Stevenson wrote of, a constituent of the aggregate that is each and every one of us. That new self serves the prisoner’s immediate needs. Once he’s… calmer, in better control of himself, he cuts more selves away and sets them loose inside the tower.”

“What for?”

“To hunt them. It’s a form of amusement for him. The original, the prisoner keeps alive for as long as he can, recapturing them when he needs to slice more selves away from them, until the person is little more than a husk. Unless, that is, a new victim wanders in, in which case, he drains the previous one immediately.”

“Why?”

“What do you mean, why?”

“I mean, why not have a couple of food sources available?”

“I’m not certain, but I believe the prisoner is afraid they would find a way to overpower him, destroy him. He’s powerful, but not all-powerful. Together, a dedicated pair of individuals might be able to accomplish what one could not.”

“But what about the copies, the other selves the guy sends off into this place? Isn’t he worried about them ganging up on him?”

“Have you encountered any of them yourself?”

“As a matter of fact, I have. That was what brought me here, actually. He got into the house and killed Orlando. He looked like he was going for Rebecca and Forster next, but I stopped him. He ran, and I chased him here.”

“Orlando’s dead?”

“Yeah.”

“But your stepmom and little brother are okay?”

“Pretty freaked out, but they’re all right.”

“Poor Orlando!” Tony said. “He was such a sweet dog. Not a mean bone in his body, I swear.”

“I don’t know if it’ll make you feel any better, but he was protecting Rebecca and Forster from you—your double.”

“God, how awful for them.”

“They’re okay, really. What about the other selves?”

“Yes, yes. I’m sure you noticed that that version of me was somewhat less articulate.”

“To put it mildly.”

“That tends to be the result of the mirror’s process. Occasionally, one is produced who’s capable of coherent speech, but they’re mad in a different way. In either case, the prisoner doesn’t have anything to worry about from the mirror’s children.”

“Is this what your vampire does when he catches one of them?” August nodded at the corpse.

“No,” his father said, “that was me.”

“You did this?”

“I did all of this.” Tony glanced at the room’s grisly contents. Was the screaming louder in here, more concentrated?

“Jesus Christ.”

“You know how savage the creatures are.”

“I get that,” August said. “Believe me. One of these guys jumps you, you have to do whatever’s necessary. It’s…” He waved his hand at the broken ribs fencing the chest cavity, the missing heart. “This seems a little premeditated, you know?”

“It was.” Before August could respond, he said, “I’m trying to starve him.”

“All right,” August said. “I can understand that. Why remove the hearts, though? Does the vampire eat them?”

“No,” Tony said, “I do.”

“What?” August’s stomach lurched. “What the fuck are you talking about?”

“I read about it. There’s a library in the tower. I was looking for a way out of here, and I thought I might find information about it there. The books on its shelves… they’re what you’d expect to find in a monster’s keeping. They’re full of… darkness. I found what I was looking for pretty quickly, but I kept reading. It had been so long since I had held an actual book in my hands, turned its pages, let my eyes take in its sentences, its paragraphs. Imagine having been without running water for a month, and then being able to sink into a hot bath. Or picture sitting down to a filet mignon after a year of stale crackers. I luxuriated in the act of reading. When the contents of the pages under my scrutiny became clear, I didn’t credit them. Isn’t that ridiculous? Eventually, I learned that there was something to them.”

“You ate someone’s heart because you read about it in a book?”

“Not someone’s heart,” Tony said, “*my* heart. My heart sectioned and sectioned again, grown coarse with the use. I’ve lost count of the number of times I’ve faced the black mirror, watched another piece of me step forth from its darkness. Frankly, I’m amazed there’s any of me left. Consuming the heart was supposed to be a way of taking what I’d lost back into myself.”

“Christ,” August said. “You make it sound so reasonable.”

“It isn’t,” Tony said, “not at all. It’s insane and obscene. But so is the tower. And the prisoner.”

“Has it worked?”

“I’m still here.”

“You said you found a way to escape this place.”

“I did. It took me some time to map out the directions to it, but I should be able to get us there fairly quickly. My God, August, how I’ve missed you. How I’ve missed all of you.”

“I—”

“I know. It hasn’t been that long for you. However, we need to start moving, or you’re going to find out how much time it’s possible to spend in here.” Tony pushed himself off the ledge on which he’d been leaning and strode past August, toward the cave entrance.

With a last look at the carnage his father had wrought, August followed. Tony turned right. After the room's beams of light, the passageway was dim to the point of blackness. August fell into step beside Tony. "The tower," he said, "the prisoner: do you know where they come from?"

Tony nodded. "I do. I have to tell you, though, that none of this was what I planned to talk to you about. Were we to meet again, I had a list of things to say to you."

"Oh yeah?"

"Yes. We weren't going to spend our time on the origins of the tower and its occupant. We were going to discuss… important things."

"Well, it's a bit late for the sex talk, so you don't have to worry about that one."

"Very funny. I assumed your mother and stepfather saw to that."

"They did. There was a book."

"A book?"

"It was pretty horrifying."

"I'm sure it was."

"So. Why didn't you try to leave before this?"

Tony glanced away. "I was afraid to. What I told you about the black mirror—there's a reason the prisoner kills the first of its creations right away. He does it to intimidate his captive, which it absolutely does. Long before the books I read in the tower's library, I knew about vampires; I taught *Carmilla* and *Dracula*. I had a good idea how to destroy one. Yet there's a difference between theory and praxis, isn't there, especially when a monster is involved. Thus my plan for starving the prisoner until he became weak enough to risk confronting."

"All right. Well, what about the prisoner?"

"His name is Mundt," Tony said, "Edon Mundt. He's from a very old city that stood on the shores of a black ocean."

"You mean, like the Black Sea?"

"I mean an ocean whose water is black. It isn't anywhere on Earth; it's on another plane of existence… another dimension."

“But there are people there.”

“More or less. Mundt was a member of the city watch, the police force. He was good at his job, excelled at it, in fact. His performance came to the attention of his superiors, and he was offered a position on the night watch. This was a group tasked with safeguarding the city’s libraries and cemeteries. It was no ceremonial post. The books in the libraries were of the same nature as the ones I discovered here, while the cemeteries were full of all manner of strange things. Mundt accepted the offer and was made part of the night watch, a process that involved his transformation into a vampire. I’m not clear on all the details, but it involved his having to walk out into the dark. Not the night, or a dark room, but something like death, if death were a place. Mundt entered the dark, and this allowed the dark to enter him. There’s a passage about a vampire in one of Byron’s poems: ‘*And fire, unquenched, unquenchable, / Around, within, thy heart shall dwell; / Nor ear can hear nor tongue can tell / The tortures of that inward hell!’* From what I’ve been able to learn, that seems a fairly apt description of his state.”

“Makes you wonder why he did it in the first place.”

“Power. The price he paid bought Mundt enormous power.”

On their left, a gap in the wall: the entrance to another tunnel. Tony took it. Carved from rock, this passage was shorter and curved to the left. Its walls were inscribed with the broken circle and the maze, set one after the other. The tunnel ended in a shallow cave, against whose back wall August distinguished a pale form slumped. At the sound of their approaching footsteps, the figure raised a head that was too long and said, “Help me.” August slowed, but Tony caught his elbow and hustled him to the left, into the next passage. August cast a glance back at the white form but could not make out any details. “Who was that?”

“Not who,” Tony said, “but what. I told you the tower jumps around in space and possibly time. Although a person doesn’t always wander in, other things do. Animals, mostly, which helps anyone alive inside it to survive. Sometimes, other… creatures show up. That”—he gestured behind them —“is one of them.”

“What does it do?”

“It hollowed out one of the mirror’s children. Left him looking like an old, empty costume. I’m not sure how.”

Shorter than the last, this tunnel’s walls were also marked with the repeating maze and broken ring. It, too, curved counterclockwise, until it met bare rock face. August saw the passage on their left before Tony could guide him toward it. “You never told me what happened to the prisoner, to this Mundt guy. I mean, after he became a vampire.”

“He committed a crime,” Tony said. “I don’t know what it was, but obviously, it was severe. The penalty was imprisonment in the tower, which was cast loose through the cosmos. The tower is… Mundt and the tower are connected, in the most fundamental of ways. Its contains all of him, all of his pain. It traps all the pain of his victims, too.”

“The screaming.”

“It’s supposed to heighten his punishment, though I’m not certain how well it’s worked.”

“That sounds pretty harsh.”

Tony shrugged. “He’s a monster.”

As had been the case with the previous tunnels, this one’s walls were carved with the broken circle and maze, and bent left. “How is it that we can keep going this way without running into the other tunnels?” August said.

“The spatial relations in here are not always consistent,” Tony said. “It’s the same with the passing of time. Depending on your location, time runs more slowly or more quickly. You’ve been down here for what? An hour?”

“Roughly, yeah.”

“Yet for anyone standing at the tower’s door, I’d guess no more than two or three minutes have elapsed.”

The passage ended in a narrow archway, through which a flight of stairs led up. Tony halted at its foot. The blended screams of Edon Mundt and his victims poured down it. “These,” he said, “will take us to the tower’s central chamber. Directly across from the top of the stairs, there is a doorway out of the tower. It has a black frame. That is our destination. The chances are excellent that Mundt will be somewhere in the room. As far as I

know, he hasn’t fed in some time. He should be weak enough for me to occupy while you make your escape.”

“While I—what are you saying?”

“At the door, touch the frame with your right hand and concentrate on where you want to go.”

“Where we want to go,” August said. “You’re coming with me.”

“We’ll see.”

“‘We’ll see’? What do you think I am, five? I am not leaving you here. I—I didn’t realize how long I’d lost you. Shit, I didn’t know you were missing to begin with.”

“You know I love you, right?”

“Stop,” August said. “Do not say that. You think I don’t know what you’re doing? That’s the kind of shit you say when you’re preparing for the big sacrifice. No. You are not doing that. No way.”

Tony smiled. “Here we are, arguing again.” With his left hand, he reached behind his back and withdrew a sizable knife from the waistband of his pants. “But we’re wasting time.”

“Where did you get that?” August said. The blade of the knife was a foot and a half long, grooved up the center; its handle was bone.

“One of the mirror’s children. I’m not sure how he obtained it. There are still parts of the tower I haven’t explored. It’s possible it was in one of them.”

“You know how to use it?”

“Did you think I killed my doubles with my bare hands?”

“I guess not. Lucky for me you didn’t stab me before you knew who I was.”

“I almost did,” Tony said. “At the last minute, something stopped me.”

“Well, that’s reassuring.”

“All right; we’d better get a move on.”

Here, the walls were cut with a single character, the maze, repeated every few feet. The lines of the symbol shone, as if they opened to a blackness

more total than August had known. He was overcome with the desire to speak to Tony, to tell him he loved him, too, he enjoyed their intermittent phone conversations, he no longer held his divorce from August's mom against him, all the platitudes brought shuffling to the fore by extremity. However, the words could not find their way out, because they were drowned by the almost-visible wave of fear that swept through the stairway and over him. The temperature might have dropped fifty degrees. His legs shook; goose bumps roughed his skin; the hair on the back of his neck stiffened. Worse, it was as if the cold had passed into him, freezing his heart, his gut, his balls. The screaming seemed to be his own, except his mouth would not open.

On the job, August had experienced moments of intense fear. His second month on duty, he'd been part of a three-man team that searched a condo in whose upstairs bedroom an old woman lay a week dead. The death had appeared natural—the woman was lying on her bed with no sign of violence done to her—but the next-door neighbor who'd called 911 in the first place claimed the old woman had taken in a young, mentally disturbed woman a few days prior to the neighbor's last contact with her. Sidearms in one hand, flashlights in the other, the smell of rot in their nostrils, August and his fellow officers had cleared the condo's surprisingly large first floor and basement. Although he feigned nonchalance later, when the residence had been found empty, during the actual process of opening doors to rooms and closets, he had been certain he could feel the madwoman in the house with them, waiting like a cliché from a horror film to leap out at them, butcher knife in hand. The air had seemed to vibrate around him, the way it does the instant after a loud noise.

Intense as it had been, the fear that had made the beam of his flashlight tremble had been generated from within, the sight of the old woman's cadaver merging with his memories of one too many slasher films. What halted his advance up the tower stairs was the polar opposite, a sensation that assaulted him entirely from without, as if this portion of the tower were subject to its own weather of the emotions. It was forty below and terrifying. He wanted to move in the worst way, to lift his foot onto the next step, but he was filled with dread that, were he to raise his leg, it would shake so badly that, when he tried to set it down, he would fall on his face,

unable to rise, defenseless against whatever used these stairs, against the vampire.

"August."

He raised his eyes. Tony had stopped five steps ahead of him. "August," he said, "come on."

August tried to speak, to say he couldn't, he was too afraid, but his teeth chattered too much for him to say anything.

"Mundt," Tony said. "Your body is reacting to him."

August nodded, his head jerking as he did.

"It's a natural response," Tony said. "He's completely antithetical to everything in you. I'm sorry; I should have thought of this. If you can focus on something else, it helps. Do you know what I do? I remember all the poems I know, all those fusty Victorians I used to teach. Would you like me to recite one for you?"

Why the hell not? He nodded.

"'*My first thought,*'" Tony said, "'*was, he lied in every word / That hoary cripple, with malicious eye / Askance to watching the working of his lie / On mine, and mouth scarce able to afford / Suppression of the glee, that purs'd and scor'd / Its edge, at one more victim gain'd thereby.*'"

The poem was longer than August had anticipated. Much of its beginning, he struggled to follow, the fear continually snapping his attention. From the way his father's voice rose and fell, flowed and ebbed, he had the sense he was overhearing someone talking to himself. As the poem progressed, so did his focus, until with a jolt, he heard Tony describe "'*the round, squat turret, blind as the fool's heart, / Built of brown stone, without a counterpart / In the whole world.*'" For the remaining lines, all of his concentration was on his father's words. When the old man finished speaking, August said, "That's it?"

"That's it."

"But—"

"Can you move?"

He could, if poorly, his leg shuddering madly as he pushed up onto the next step. “Can you recite it again?”

“Of course. Let’s try to keep climbing.”

“‘*My first thought,*’” Tony began, and August raised his left leg. The speaker of the poem—some kind of knight, from what August could tell—left the road he’d been traveling to cross a gray field, bare of everything but weeds and scrub grass. On the stairway’s surface, the images of the maze shimmered, as if full of black water. The knight encountered a starved horse, forded “*a sudden little river*” that was “*unexpected as a serpent*.” Above and beyond Tony, a doorway was visible. The knight came upon ground churned muddy by a savage fight, beheld an “*engine,*” a “*wheel, / Or brake, not wheel,*” a “*harrow fit to reel / Men’s bodies out like silk*.” Faint light flickered within the doorway. At last, the knight arrived at the object of his quest, the “*round, squat turret*.” Two steps down from the doorway, Tony paused. He looked back at August.

“That’s a terrible ending,” August said.

“You aren’t the first person to say so. How are you doing?”

“I’m managing. Thanks.”

Tony pointed at the door. “Things are about to get worse.”

“Great.”

“I’d like to ask if you’re ready, but there isn’t much choice.”

“It’s okay.”

“The door should be across from where we emerge. As I’ve said, though, the geography of this structure can be rather fluid, so if you don’t see it where it’s supposed to be, look around. Remember: it’ll be the doorway with the black frame.”

“What about Mundt?”

“Let me worry about him.”

“You’re going to take on a vampire.”

“Remind me of your experience with the subject.”

“What happened to all that overwhelming terror?”

“It hasn’t gone anywhere, don’t worry. But seeing you… I’d really like to see your stepmother and little brother again.”

“A knife’s going to be enough?”

“It’s what they use to dispatch Dracula.”

“I never read that book.”

“Neither has Mundt. Don’t worry—I picked up a couple of tidbits from the books in Mundt’s library that should prove useful. Let’s go.”

The room into which they stepped was big as a banquet hall. A scattering of torches set shoulder high cast orange light over plain brick walls, leaving the vaulted ceiling in shadow. Opposite Tony and August, a door with a thick black border opened to a patch of green grass and sunlight, the meadow at the bottom of the back hill. Hope and relief surged through August. Despite his protests to the contrary, he had understood that Tony might not make it out of here with him. August had been trying to work out how he would get his father home should Edon Mundt appear, but the only solution that presented itself—shove the old man through and stay to deal with the monster himself—was not particularly inviting. Now, though, it appeared no such sacrifice would be necessary for either Tony or him. If only his legs would move faster, he would be on the other side of this chamber and out of this nightmare in no time.

They were less than halfway to the door when the voice breathed his father’s name: *“Anthony*.” It rustled around the room, a breeze rattling dead leaves, somewhere beneath the screaming. *“What have you brought me?”*

“Don’t stop,” Tony said.

“Don’t worry.”

“Is that little Augustus?” the voice continued. *“Your son? Your firstborn? You’ve brought him here to me?”*

The doorway was farther away than it had appeared. Or had the room grown larger? In the wavering torchlight, it was difficult to tell. One moment, the space was vast as a cathedral; the next, it contracted to the size of a large hall. It was as if he and Tony were inside a great heart made of brick and shadow. Each time the chamber expanded, August had the momentary impression he glimpsed something out of the corners of his

eyes, something awful, but when he glanced in either direction, the room shrank, and all he saw was bare brick.

"The door," Tony said. "Keep your eyes on the door."

"Of course," the voice said, *"you never really wanted him, did you? His mother's decision: wasn't that what you said? You couldn't stand that, could you? Couldn't accept the* unfairness *of it all, of her having so much control over you. So much power. You've never been able to forgive little Augustus for the way his mother used him against you, have you? Never been able to love him all the way, unconditionally. The way a father should. Not like his brother—Forster, isn't it? You wanted that child. Oh yes you did. And now you've brought me this one as what? Payment for your exit from my company?"*

"Mundt," Tony said, "shut the fuck up."

"Hey," August said, "what happened to 'language'?"

"You don't argue with the devil; he always wins."

"The two of you have spoken, though."

"I've been in here a long time. So has Mundt. Over the years, he proposed a number of… truces, I suppose you could call them. He'd had his fill of blood and was interested in other pursuits, in conversation. It was a while before I accepted his offer. Even then, I was fairly certain I was heading to my death."

"Why go, then?"

"Curiosity. A change from the monotony of worrying about evading capture by him and running into the mirror's children. The chance to learn something about my captor that might help me get the better of him."

"Uh-huh. So what's it like having dinner with a vampire?"

"Like sitting at the table with a cobra. I think I was even more afraid than I was when I first arrived here, when I watched him slash open my double's throat. Every time we met, I was aware that I was in the presence of a creature utterly lethal. He wears death like a waistcoat."

"Which didn't stop you from telling him all about me."

Tony paused. They had drawn nearer the doorway, though exactly how close they were was difficult to ascertain, as the distance kept telescoping out and in with the shifting light. “August,” he said.

“It’s fine,” August said, pushing past him. “None of it’s exactly a surprise.”

“None of it’s exactly true, either.”

“*But true enough!*” the vampire said. “*And that’s too true for comfort, isn’t it, Augustus?*”

“Fuck off,” August said.

The strip of grass visible through the doorway was fading. “What’s happening?” August said.

“The tower’s shifting,” Tony said. “We don’t have that far. Run.”

Although his legs were not fully recovered from their paralysis on the stairs, August lurched forward. As he did, the air filled with the sound of flapping, as if a great flock of birds were taking wing. From all over the room, pieces of blackness loosened themselves from the surrounding shadow and darted to a point to his and Tony’s left. They spiraled into a whirlwind that reached to the ceiling, then shrank and condensed into the form of a man. Dressed in black robes that eddied about him, Edon Mundt wore a mask shaped to resemble the head of an ebony bird with a long, cruel beak. Without hesitation, he strode toward August and Tony, his robes catching on shadows as he came. The torches flickered, dimmed.

“Almost there,” Tony said.

The light flared, and August saw that the floor was crowded with corpses, with dozens of bodies torn asunder. August had the sense that they had always been there, he had simply been unable to see that he could see them. All of them were Tony. Here was his father with his throat torn out. Here was his father with belly opened, his intestines strewn about him. Here was his father with the top of his skull gone and its contents removed. Here was Tony’s right arm. Here was his blue eye staring. Here was a scattering of his fingers. Here was his father’s mouth open again and again, as if the true source of the screaming that rang the air.

“August!” Tony shouted. “Keep moving.”

August was almost at the door when Mundt slid in front of him with a sinuous motion that, yes, called to mind an enormous snake. August staggered to a halt, almost tipping forward into the vampire. “Augustus,” Mundt said, as if they were old friends who had run into one another unexpectedly. This close, Mundt was unbelievably tall. His robes were bedecked with long feathers or scales that clacked and clashed as he moved; his mask was sewn of a leathery material that appeared to grow out of the exposed flesh of his cheeks and jaw. His teeth were not visible, but his breath was foul, as if his gums and tongue were diseased, rotten. His presence flooded August with despair immediate and total. How had he thought—how had he *dreamed* he could escape this creature? His father had compared Mundt to a cobra; August suddenly knew what a mouse must feel, watching the hood open, the jaws part, the tongue flick out, tasting the fear in the air.

“Go!” Tony shoved him to the right, away from Mundt. He could see the doorway in which the rectangle of sunlit grass had not faded completely from view. Tony uttered something he didn’t understand, and white light burst in the room. Mundt shrieked, a pair of knives scraping together. His eyes dazzled, August stumbled in the direction of the exit.

“That will not save you,” Mundt said.

“It wasn’t supposed to,” Tony said.

August stretched out his hand and touched the smooth wood of the door frame. *Concentrate on where you want to go*, Tony had said. He pictured the meadow, the hill sloping up from it, the yellow cape visible beyond the crest. “All right,” he called, “I’m here. Dad! Come on!”

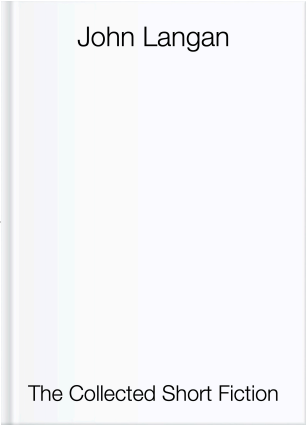
Tony repeated the strange syllable, and brightness scorched the air. “Go!” he shouted. “Go on! I’m right behind you!”

August stepped through the door, glancing back as he did. In the instant before he passed through the fall of black water, he watched his father drive his knife into the center of Mundt’s form, twisting his body to give the blow all of his strength. At the same moment, Mundt’s head surged forward, joining with and absorbing his mask, becoming a black scythe that he drove into the base of Tony’s throat. Tony’s blood hissed over Mundt’s flesh.

August's cry accompanied him out the doorway's other side, into the meadow on whose grass he collapsed. He had not moved when the pair of sheriff's deputies charged down the hill a minute later. While one surveyed the meadow, the trees beyond, the other knelt beside August. "You're August?" the deputy said. "Your father—where's your father?"

He could no longer hear the tower. If he looked, he knew, he would not see it. "He isn't here," August said. "He's gone. My dad is gone."

Corpsemouth



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I

In July of 1994, the year after my father died, my mother, youngest sister, and I went to Greenock, Scotland, from which my parents had emigrated to the United States almost thirty years before. Mom and Mackenzie flew over for a month; I joined them two weeks into their trip. The three of us stayed with my father's mother, who owned a semi-detached house set near the top of a modest hill. From the window of its front bedroom, on the second storey, you could look out on the River Clyde, here a tidal estuary, which had allowed the region to become a center for British shipbuilding for over two centuries. Two miles across, the river's far shore was layered with green hills, the Trossachs, long and sloping, the markers of geological traumas ancient and extreme.

I actually arrived a day late, because of a mechanical difficulty with my plane that was not detected until we were ready to pull away from the gate. The pilot's intimation of it in his message to the passengers caused a woman seated ahead of me to start shouting, "Oh my God, I had a dream about this last night. We're going to crash. The plane is going to crash. We can't take off." Fortunately for her—and possibly, for the rest of us—we were removed from the plane and bused to one of the airport's hotels, where we were put up overnight.

I spent part of that time trying to phone someone on this side of the Atlantic who could call my relatives overseas to let them know not to go to the airport for me. I had no luck, and passed the remainder of the night restless from the knowledge that I would have to be up early if I didn't want to miss the return bus to the terminal. I wasn't certain why I had taken the time off from the optometrists' office I was managing for this trip. Obviously, it had to do with the loss of my father, with an effort to address the gap his death

had left in my life by returning to the place of his birth and early life, by spending time with the members of his family who still lived there, as if geography and blood might help to heal the edges of what remained a ragged wound. Already, though, my plan seemed off to a dubious start.

II

The sleep I managed was troubled. I fell into a dream in which I watched my father as he sat with a handful of other men in the back of a van speeding along a narrow street that ran between high brick walls blackened by age. Overhead, what might have been the gnarled branches of trees peeked down from the tops of the walls. My father looked as he had during my later childhood, slender, his hair already fled from the top of his head. He was dressed in a denim worksheet and jeans, as were the rest of the men. Although he did not look at me, I was certain he knew that I was watching him, and I waited for him to turn to me and say something. He did not.

III

Despite my concerns, I woke in plenty of time, and had an uneventful flight across the ocean, and was met at the airport in Glasgow by one of my older cousins and my mother and sister. They had checked the flight information before leaving for my original arrival, learned of the alteration to my trip, and saved themselves the earlier run to the airport. Although the ride to my grandmother’s wasn’t especially long, I was still feeling the effects of my night in the airport hotel (I was too much of a nervous flyer to have napped during my time in the air), and I struggled to hold open my eyelids, which felt weighted with lead. I had a confused impression of stone and steel buildings, of cars and trucks flowing around us, of a strip of blue river speeding by on my right. When we arrived at my grandmother’s house, I succeeded in greeting her and one of my aunts and a couple of my cousins, but it wasn’t long before I climbed the stairs to the front bedroom, assuring everyone that I just needed a little nap, and slept straight through to the next morning.

IV

Somewhere deep in that sleep, I dreamed I was standing at the picture window overlooking the Clyde. It was night, but the sky shone silver-white with the gloaming, casting sufficient light for me to see that the river was dry. Its bed was a wide, muddy trench bordered by rocky margins draped with seaweed. At points further out in the mud, boulders sat alone and in clumps. Thousands, tens of thousands of fish lay on the mud and rocks, their long, silver bodies catching the light. Most of them were dead; a few still thrashed. All along the riverbed, a great line of people walked downstream, towards the ocean. Male, female, old, young, tall, short, fat, thin: they were as varied a group as you could assemble. As was their dress: some were in their work clothes, some their pajamas; some in formal wear, some in hospital gowns; some wearing the uniforms of their professions, some stark naked. The only detail they shared was their bare feet. They trudged through mud that sucked at their ankles, that slurped at their shins, that surged around their thighs. If they were closer to shore, they stumbled on seaweed, slid on rocks. They trod on fish, kicked them out of the way. It seemed to me that there was something I wasn't seeing, a presence weighting the scene in front of me. It was waiting at the corners of my vision, huge and old and empty. Or, not empty so much as hungry. There was no sound from the crowd, but overhead, I heard a high-pitched ringing, like what occurs when you run your damp finger around the rim of a wineglass.

V

The following morning, I came downstairs to the smells of the breakfast my grandmother was cooking for me, fried eggs and bacon, fried tomatoes, buttered toast, orange juice, and instant coffee. She had insisted to my mother and sister that she was going to make breakfast for me, and that she wanted us to have some time alone. Mom and Mackenzie had removed themselves to my Aunt Betty and Uncle Stewart's house, a short distance along the road.

I wasn't certain what my grandmother wanted. While we had seen my father's parents during our previous visits to Scotland, it had seemed to me that we spent more time with my mother's mother, who had come to stay with us in America (though I didn't remember her visits). The most I had

spoken to my father's mother was immediately after his death, when I had done my best to console her over the phone, assuring her that he had been suffering and was at least out of pain, and she had said, "It's like it's himself talking to me."

Now, she sat down with me at her small kitchen table and said, "Tell me about your dad, son."

I didn't know what to say. Her question should not have caught me off guard. My father had been his parents' acknowledged favorite—as one of his younger brothers had told me, their mother's golden boy. Although Mom, my siblings, and I had visited Scotland only every few years, for a good part of my childhood, Dad's job with IBM had necessitated regular international travel, to Paris and Frankfurt, and he was usually able to arrange an extra couple of days' stay with his parents. Despite his geographical distance from them, he had been able to maintain a close relationship with his mother and father; whereas myself, my brother, and my sisters knew our paternal grandparents mostly as names Dad and Mom discussed now and again. Occasionally, my father would mention his father as the source of an old song he was singing, or relate an anecdote about my grandfather's days in the shipyards, when he'd argued with his fellow workers against unionizing. He didn't say much about his mother; though his affection for her was palpable. For her to want me to tell her about him now was no surprise. Quite reasonably, she assumed that he was what we had in common, and she assumed that I felt about him the way she did.

This was not exactly the case. I loved him, fiercely, the way I had as a small child. For almost as long, though, that love had been complicated by other emotions, ones that, at twenty-five, I was nowhere near reckoning with. There was fear, of him and the temper that could ignite without warning, and for him and the heart whose consecutive infarctions during my eighth grade school year had left me in constant dread of his mortality. There was anger, at his stubborn insistence on his point of view, at his tendency to cut short so many of our more recent arguments by threatening to put my head through the wall if I didn't shut up. There was embarrassment, at the prejudices that had trailed him from his upbringing, against everyone who was not white, Catholic, and Scottish, at his tendency to point out the flaws even of people he was praising. And there was guilt

(as some comedian or another said, the gift that keeps on giving), at my inability to love him as simply, as straightforwardly, as did my siblings. In the year or so leading up to his death, he and I had seemed to be moving, slowly, tentatively, toward some new stage in our relationship, one in which the two of us might be less on guard around one another, more relaxed, but his two months in Westchester Medical Center, his death, had forever kept us from reaching that place.

None of this could I say to my grandmother. Eyes wide behind her glasses, lips pressed together, she inclined ever-so-slightly toward me, her attitude one of anticipation, for anecdotes and details that would allow her son to live again in her mind's eye. So that was what I gave her, a morning's worth of stories about Dad. I couldn't not talk about his final stay in the hospital, the open heart surgery from which he had never fully recovered, becoming steadily weaker, until testing revealed that he had late-stage cirrhosis, his liver was failing, and the situation roared downhill like a roller coaster whose brakes had sheared off. But I could balance that story with others, most of them focusing on his pride in my brother and sisters. I told her about the cross-country and spring track practices and meets he picked them up from and drove them to. I narrated his help with and participation in their assorted science projects (including letting Mackenzie wake him throughout the night in order to assess the effects of an interrupted sleep schedule on his ability to perform a set number of tasks). I shared with her his delight in my brother's acceptance to medical school, and his pride in Christopher's commission in the Navy. I expressed his admiration for my middle sister, Rita, who managed a schedule that included teaching dance classes at the school at which she was a student, playing guitar with the church folk group, and working a part-time job at an optometrist's office, all the while completing high school. I considered it an achievement that, not once during our extended breakfast, did my grandmother ask about my father and me.

VI

The remainder of the day consisted of a visit to my aunt and uncle's house, a few hundred yards up the road, for a loud and cheery dinner of meat pies, sausage rolls, bridies, chips, and beans, with Irn Bru to drink. We were

joined by Stewart and Betty's children and children-in-law, and their grandchildren, who were fascinated by my American accent and kept asking me to pronounce words in it. Uncle Stewart promised to drive me around to see the local sights; one of my cousins and his wife invited Mackenzie and me to watch a movie at their place; another of my cousins said that my sister and I had to come fishing with her and her dad another night. Oh, and there was a fair down by the water next weekend… In a matter of two hours, my schedule for most of my remaining time in Greenock was arranged. I didn't mind. I had grown up without much in the way of extended family nearby; really, it was just Mom, Dad, my brother, sisters, and me. During the months after my father's death, when the flood of calls and visitors that had swept over us in the immediate aftermath of his passing diminished to a stream, then a trickle, then dried completely, I had felt this lack acutely. To be here, taken into the bosom of Dad's family, was like being gathered into an incredibly soft, comfortable blanket. I loved it.

VII

Later that night, though, as I was sitting up in bed, trying to read by the astonishing late light, I found myself unable to concentrate on my book. Had Mackenzie been awake, I would have talked to her, but I could hear my sister snoring in the back bedroom, which she was sharing with Mom. I could have checked on my mother, but even if she was awake, I was reluctant to disturb her with what was on my mind. It concerned my father, and his final stay in the hospital.

The morning after he emerged from surgery, the nurses propped him up in bed and gave him a pen and pad of paper with which to communicate. (He was, and would remain, intubated, his breathing assisted by a ventilator.) Due to the ICU regulations, only three of us could visit him at a time, so my sister, Rita, and I waited and sent Mom, our brother, and Mackenzie in first. Rita and I made small talk for five or ten minutes, then Chris and Mackenzie came out to trade places with us. I had seen my father in the hospital before, many times, and the sight of him in his hospital gown, the top of the white ridge of bandages visible at its collar, below the trach tube, was not shocking. What was strange, off, was the expression on his face, his brows lowered, his jaw set, a look of concern tinted with anger. Rita and I

crossed the ICU cubicle to him and embraced him, both of us delivering deliberately casual greetings, trying to act as if everything was fine, or was going to be fine. He returned our hugs, then turned his attention to the pad of paper propped on his lap. He took his pen and carefully wrote a sentence. When he was finished, he held the pad up for my inspection.

The line he'd written was composed of characters I didn't recognize. There was what might have been a square, except that the upper right corner didn't connect. There was a triangle whose points were rounded. There were parallel lines drawn at an angle, descending from right to left. There was a circle with a horizontal line bisecting it, an upside-down crescent, and a square whose bottom line turned up inside the shape before connecting with the line on the left, and which continued to turn at ninety-degree angles within the square, making a kind of stylized maze. I stared at the symbols, and looked at my father. My lack of comprehension was glaringly obvious. I said, "Um, I'm sorry—I don't understand what you're trying to tell me."

In response, he underlined the strange sentence several times and showed it to me again.

"Dad," I said, "I don't understand. I'm sorry. I can't read this."

His eyebrows raised in frustration. Although he was on the respirator, I could practically hear him blowing out his breath in exasperation. Employing the pen as a pointer, he moved it from symbol to symbol, as if taking me slowly through a simple statement.

I could feel my face growing hot. I shook my head, held up my hands.

He glared at me.

"Let me see," my mother said, leaning over from the other side of his bed. She didn't have any more luck with what Dad had written than had I. He was irritated with both of us—Rita refrained from looking at the pad—but his annoyance with me felt as if it had a particular edge, as if I, of all people, should understand what he was showing me.

After that, it was time to go. When we returned for the next visiting session, two-and-a-half hours later, Dad was surrounded by several nurses, all of whom were focused on preventing him from leaving his bed, which he was trying to do with more vigor than I would have anticipated from a

man who had just had his chest cracked open. Mom talked to him, as did the rest of us as we came and went from the room, but though the sound of her voice, and ours, calmed him slightly, it wasn't enough to make him abandon his efforts. This led to him being given a mild sedative, then put in restraints. For the next two weeks, he struggled with those restraints daily, pulling at the padded cuffs buckled to his wrists. His features were set in a look of utter determination; if any of us spoke to him, he regarded us as if we were strangers.

My mother was afraid he had suffered a stroke, one of the possible complications of the surgery about which she and Dad had been warned. In the notes to his chart, the nurses described his new condition as a coma. Neither diagnosis seemed right to me, but where was my medical degree? All I knew was, he wasn't there, in that writhing body—or maybe, we weren't there for him, he was seeing himself in surroundings foreign and frightening. Finally, at the end of fourteen days of watching him wrestle with his restraints, one of the doctors realized that Dad might be having an allergic reaction to a drug they had been giving him (we never learned which one) and ordered it stopped. With the cessation of that drug, he returned to normal within a day. The restraints were removed, and although he only left his room for follow-up x-rays and further surgery, at least he was himself.

Those symbols, though, I had not forgotten. The most likely explanation was that they were an early product of my father's drug allergy. Had any of my siblings, my mother, asked me about them, I would have offered this rationale myself. Yet on some deeper level, I didn't buy this. He had exhibited too much focus in writing them. Had he ever been well enough to be removed from the ventilator, I would have asked him about them. Since that hadn't happened, they remained a mystery. I might be transforming the scribbling of a mind frightened and confused into a coded message of great import, but I could not forget the expression on my father's face as he showed me what he had set down.

After all, during the surgery, his heart had been stopped, and although a heart-lung machine had continued to circulate and oxygenate his blood, who could say what state he—his self, his soul—had been in for that span of time, how far he might have wandered from his body? Sometimes, I

imagined him, waking from his surgery to find himself in an unadorned room with a single chair and a single door, and being told by a man in a drab suit that this was where he had to wait until the operation was completed and the doctors found out whether or not they could restart his heart. I imagined the man offering him a newspaper, its headlines the row of symbols he would copy for me.

To what end, though? I recognized the scenario I had invented, the speculation that prompted it, as magical thinking of the most basic kind, driven by longing for my father to have been involved in something more than the slow and painful process of his death. In his writing, I hoped for clues to another state of being, evidence of the place he had entered when he died.

I sat my book down on the nightstand. I eased out of my bed and crossed to the large window that gave a view of the Clyde and its far shore. In the late light, the river was the color of burnished tin, the Trossachs purple darkening to black. My father had not lived in this house—one of his mother's cousins had bought it for her after my grandfather died. But the river it surveyed had shaped his life as definitively as it had the land through which it flowed. The shipyards on its banks had brought my great-grandfather here from Ireland. A younger son of a farming family, disqualified from inheriting the farm by his order of birth, he had booked passage across the Irish Sea to find work as part of the industry building the vessels with which the British Empire maintained its quarter of the globe. Beyond that, I didn't know much about the man. I presumed he had obtained my grandfather's job in the shipyards for him, which I knew had consisted at one point of painting the hulls of ships. I wasn't sure why my father hadn't followed him in turn, unless it was because my grandfather (and probably, grandmother) had wanted something else for him, an office job, which he eventually found with IBM. All the same, Dad had courted Mom on the Esplanade that ran along the Clyde on the eastern side of town, and he kept newspaper clippings about the river that his relatives mailed to him folded and tucked within the pages of his Bible. I wasn't any closer to knowing what I expected from this trip. But gazing out at the river, the hills, felt strangely reassuring.

VIII

That night, my dreams took me down to the Clyde. A chain link fence kept me from a flat, paved surface above which cranes rose like giant metal sculptures. I turned to look behind me, and almost toppled into a chasm that dropped a good twenty feet. The gap ran parallel to the fence, to the river beyond. Maybe ten feet across, its walls were brick, old, blackened; although its bottom was level—a road, I realized when I saw a white, boxy van drive up it. At once, I knew two things with dream certainty: my father was in that van, and there was something at my back, on the other side of the paved lot. The hairs on the back of my neck prickled at it. Old—I could feel its age, a span of years so great it set me shivering uncontrollably. I did not want to see this. I shook with such intensity, it jolted me from sleep. Awake, I could not stop trembling, and wrapped the bedclothes around me. I took a few minutes to return to sleep, and once I did, it was to a different dream.

IX

Once he was home from work the next day, Uncle Stewart made good on his promised tour of the area. Mackenzie came, too. The three of us squeezed into his car, a white Nissan Micra whose cramped interior lived up to its name, and off we went. A soft-spoken man, Stewart kept a cigarette lit and burning between his lips for most of the drive. He worked for a high-tech manufacturer who had moved into one of the old shipping buildings. He was what my parents called crafty, which meant he had a knack for artistic projects. Fifteen years before, when he'd been laid off his job at the shipyards and unable to find another, he had turned his efforts to building doll-sized replicas of old, horse-drawn traveler's trailers. He'd gifted one to my parents, who placed it in their bedroom, where my siblings and I went to admire it. The detail on the trailer was amazing, from the flowered curtains hung inside the small windows to the ornaments on the porcelain horse's bridle. (He bought the horses in bulk from a department store.) Stewart had sold his trailers, first to family, then to friends, then to friends of friends, then to their friends, the money he earned helping to keep his family afloat until he found a new job.

He was also a repository of local knowledge, some of which he shared with Mackenzie and me as he steered the Micra up and down Greenock's steep streets. He showed us the house our father had grown up in, the apartment where our mother had been raised by her mother, the church where our parents had married. He drove us down to the river, to the Esplanade, and along to where a few cranes stood at the water's edge like enormous steel insects. He drove us east, out of town, towards Glasgow, so that he could show us Dumbarton Rock across the Clyde, a great rocky molar whose ragged crown stood two hundred feet above the river. A scattering of stone blocks was visible at the summit. Nodding at the rock, Stewart said, "There's been a castle of some sort there forever," the words emerging from his mouth in puffs of cigarette smoke that his open window caught and sucked out of the car. "Back when the Vikings held the mouth of the Clyde, and the islands, that was the westernmost stronghold of the British. Before that, the local kings ruled from atop it. Like the castle in Edinburgh—Sterling, too. There's a story that Merlin paid the place a visit, in the sixth century."

"King Arthur's Merlin?" I said.

"Aye. The king at the time was called Riderch. They called him 'the generous.' King Arthur's nephew, Hoel, was passing through, and he was injured. Fell off his horse or the like. King Riderch put him up while he was healing. When Riderch's foes learned he had King Arthur's nephew under his roof, they laid siege to the place. Riderch had a magic sword—*Dyrnwyn*—that burst into flame whenever he drew it, but he and his men were pretty badly outnumbered. There was no way he could get word to King Arthur down in Camelot in time for it to do him any good. It looked as if Arthur's nephew was going to be killed while under Riderch's care. So was Riderch himself, but you see what I'm saying. It would be a big dishonor for Riderch, alive or dead."

Stewart steered toward an exit on the left that took us to a roundabout. He followed it half-way around, until we were heading back toward Greenock. As he did, he said, "This was when Merlin showed up. He'd been keeping an eye on Hoel, and he'd seen the trouble Riderch was in for his hospitality to Arthur's kin. He presented himself to the King, and offered his

assistance. ‘No offense,’ says Riderch, ‘but you’re one man. There’s a thousand men at my front door. What can you do about a force of that size?’

“‘Well,’ says Merlin. The King has a point. He is only one man, and although his father was a devil, there is a limit to his power. ‘However,’ says he, ‘I have allies I can call upon for help. And against them, no force of men can stand.’

“‘Then I wish you’d ask those friends for their aid,’ says Riderch.

“Merlin says okay. He tells the King he needs a corpse, the fresher, the better. It just so happens that, earlier that very day, Riderch’s men caught a couple of their enemies attempting to sneak over the castle wall. He has his men bring them before him, and right on the spot, executes the pair. ‘There you go,’ he says to Merlin. ‘There’s two corpses for you.’

“‘Good,’ says Merlin. He has the King’s soldiers carry the bodies right outside the front gate. It’s going on night time, and Riderch’s foes have withdrawn to their tents. Merlin instructs the soldiers to dig a shallow grave, one big enough for the two dead men. Once it’s been dug, he has them lay the corpses in it and cover them over. Then he sets to, using his staff to draw all manner of strange characters in the soil. He was a great one for writing, was Merlin. If you read some of the older stories about him, he’s always writing on things, prophecies of coming events, usually. King Riderch watches him, but he doesn’t recognize the characters Merlin’s scratching into the dirt.

“When he’s done, Merlin steps back from the grave. Pretty soon, the earth begins to tremble. It moves from somewhere deep below them, as if something’s digging its way up to them. Over in the siege camp, a few of Riderch’s enemies have been watching Merlin’s show. As the ground shakes, more of them run to see what’s causing the disturbance. The soil over the grave jumps, and a great head pushes its way through the dirt. It’s a man’s head, but it’s the size of a hut. The hair is clotted with earth. The skin is all leathery, shrunk to the skull. The eyes are empty pits. The lips are blackened, pulled back from teeth the size of a man’s arm. The arms and legs of the bodies the King’s men buried hang out over the teeth, the remainder of the corpses inside the huge mouth. It’s a giant Merlin’s summoned, but no such giant as anyone there has ever heard tell of. It’s as

much an enormous corpse as those it crunches between its teeth. It keeps coming, head and neck, shoulders and arms, chest and hips, until it towers above them. You can imagine the reaction of Riderch's foes: sheer panic. The King and his men aren't too far away from it, themselves. Merlin touches his arm and says, 'Steady.' He points to the siege camp and says to the monster, 'Right. Those are for you.'

"The giant doesn't need to be told twice. It takes a couple of steps, and it's in the midst of the enemy fighters, most of whom are trampling each other in their haste to get away from it. It leans down, sweeps up a handful of men, and stuffs them into its mouth. It stomps others like they're ants. It kicks campfires apart, catches men and tears them to pieces. A few try to fight it. They grab their spears and swords and stab it. But that leathery skin is too tough; their blades can't pierce it. Soon, the giant's feet are covered in gore. Its lips and chin are smeared with the blood of the men it's eaten. There's no satisfying the thing; it continues to jam screaming men into its mouth. In a matter of a few minutes, Merlin's monster has broken the siege. In a few more, it's routed Riderch's foes. Some of them flee to the ships they sailed here. The giant pursues them, smashes the prows of the ships, breaks off a mast and uses it as a club on ships and men alike.

"King Riderch turns to Merlin and says, 'What is this thing you've brought forth?'

"'That,' says Merlin, 'is Corpsemouth.'

"'Corpsemouth,' says Riderch. 'Him, I have not heard of.'

"Merlin says, 'He and his brethren were worshipped here many a long year ago. He was not known as Corpsemouth, then, but what his original name was has been lost. He and his kindred were replaced by other gods, who were replaced by newer gods than those, and so on until the Romans brought their gods, and now the Christians theirs. All of Corpsemouth's fellows went to the place old gods go when men are done with them, the Graveyard of the Gods. Corpsemouth, though, refused to suffer the same fate as his kin. Instead, he lived on their remains. If any men stumbled across him, they were his. As later generations of gods came to the Graveyard, so Corpsemouth had them, too. Down through the ages he has

continued, losing hold of everything he used to be, until all that remains is his hunger.'

"Riderch watches the giant crushing the last remnants of his enemies. He says, 'This is blasphemy.'

"'Maybe,' Merlin says, 'but it saved King Arthur's nephew, and it saved you, too.' Which Riderch can't argue with.

"Once the last of the enemy fighters is dead, the giant, Corpsemouth, turns in the direction of Merlin and the King. Riderch puts his hand on his sword, but Merlin tells him to keep it in its sheath. He points his staff at the hills behind Dumbarton Rock. Corpsemouth nods that great, gruesome head, and walks off in that direction. That's the last Riderch sees of him, and of Merlin, for the matter. I don't suppose he was too upset about either."

Stewart's story had taken us all the way back to his front door. He pulled the parking brake and turned off the engine. "And that," he said with a grin, "is a wee bit of your local history."

Mackenzie and I thanked him, for the story and for the tour. While we were walking up to the house, my sister said, "Where did Merlin send the monster—Corpsemouth?"

Our uncle paused at the front door. "The story doesn't say. Maybe north, to the mountains. That's where many terrible and awful beasts were said to dwell. I'll tell you what I think. A few miles east of Dumbarton Rock, there was an old burial place unearthed in the 1930s. It was the talk of this part of the country. I remember my father speaking about it. The fellows who dug it up said they found evidence of an ancient temple there. 'Scotland's Stonehenge,' the papers called it."

"What happened to it?" I said. "Can you visit it?"

"They put a pair of apartment buildings over the spot," Stewart said. "The war interrupted the excavation, then, when the war was over, another group of scientists said the chaps who'd discovered the place had overstated its significance. There were a few rock carvings that were of interest, they said, but as long as they were removed and sent to the museum in Glasgow, they saw no reason not to build the high rises there. So the men from the museum came and cut out the pieces of rock to be preserved and the rest became part of the foundation for the new construction. My father was

upset about it, about all of it, but especially about the carvings being taken away. ‘There’s folk put they things there for a reason,’ he says, ‘and yon men from the museum would do well enough to leave them be. There’s no telling what trouble they’ll stir.’ I suppose he had a point. Although,” Stewart added, “I’ve yet to see any giants prowling the hills. But if you ask me, that’s where Merlin told Corpsemouth to go.”

X

That night, I lay in bed thinking about Stewart’s story, wondering what my father would have made of it. Mackenzie was sleeping over at Stewart and Aunt Betty’s house, or I might have asked her. My mother was long since unconscious. I was sure Dad would have enjoyed Stewart’s tale as entertainment. He was a great fan of adventure stories of all stripes, with a soft spot for horror narratives, too. Mostly, he watched them as movies and TV shows; although he might read a book like *Firefox* or *Last of the Breed*. Whenever he saw a new movie, especially if it had been on TV too late for me and my brother, he would describe it to us the next day, in a scene-by-scene retelling no less detailed than the story Stewart had told. In this way, I knew the plots to most of the Connery and Moore James Bonds, a number of Clint Eastwood thrillers, and an assortment of films focused on mythological figures, such as Hercules. He would have appreciated the way Stewart’s tale blended the historical with the horrific; though he might have preferred a different, more dramatic end to the monster, blasted by Merlin’s magic, say, or set alight by King Riderch’s fiery sword.

I was less sure how he would have dealt with the story’s pagan elements, especially the idea that gods came and went over time. I knew he’d been interested in mythology. Exploring the basement as a child, I had found stacked in the shelves near the furnace a half-dozen issues of a magazine called *Man, Myth & Magic*, whose title had appealed to me instantly but whose pages, full of reproductions of old woodcuts and classical paintings, not to mention articles written in a dry, academic language, left me confused. I’d wanted to ask him about the magazines, but had the sense that I shouldn’t. There was a reason they were in the basement, after all. Plus, puzzle me though they did, I didn’t want to lose access to them, which I might if he realized I was paging through them. So I kept quiet about the

magazines, but I noticed that, whenever I brought up stories from the Greek or Norse myths I was reading, he usually knew them; though he tended to downplay his knowledge.

I wasn't sure to what extent this was because he was a devout Catholic, his faith fire-hardened from having grown up in a Protestant culture of institutionalized religious prejudice. He was leery of anything that might contradict the Church, his faith threaded through with a profound anxiety about Hell. Occasionally, he spoke about the Passionist fathers who visited his local church when he was a boy to deliver terrifying sermons on the fate of the damned. (I wondered if this was part of the attraction horror films had for him, their glimpses of the infernal.) The standard by which a soul would be judged after death was a source of concern, even worry, for him. We had discussed the apparition of the Virgin Mary to the children at Fatima, during which, she had told one of the boys to whom she revealed herself that he was destined to spend a great deal of time in Purgatory. While Purgatory was not Hell, neither was it a place to which you would have expected a young child to be sent. What could he have done, Dad said, to merit such a punishment? With the perspective of the last year, it had become clear to me that his questions about my church attendance during the two years I lived in Albany, his concern about my dating a girl who wasn't Catholic, were rooted in an honest desire to keep me out of Hell, whose smoky fires burned low and red in the corners of his mind.

I didn't believe my father had anything to fear from eternal damnation. I wasn't sure there was anything for him to be concerned about, one way or the other. During my youth, I had been as devout as my father. To be honest, I had loved my religion, which was full of all manner of marvelous stories, those in the Old and New Testaments, yes, and those in the lives of the saints, too. I shared some of dad's nervousness at the threat of Hell, but I grew up in the post-Vatican II Church, when the rewards of salvation were emphasized over the torments of damnation. Once I entered adolescence, however, the joys of the opposite sex became vastly more compelling than the strictures of faith. If I was hardly original in this—indeed, compared to the rest of my high school classmates, I was the latest of late bloomers—I roamed off the beaten path in my growing intellectual disagreement with the Church. I found its positions on most social matters riven by

contradiction; nor did it help that so many of the men who pronounced them did so with an air of self-righteousness that set my adolescent teeth on edge. The ritual of the Mass, and its central conceit, the intersection of the numinous with the mundane, continued to speak to me, albeit, in a more figurative sense than I was sure my father would have approved. Religion in general seemed to me increasingly figurative, less a description of some ultimate reality than, at best, another human invention to help us through the struggle of living. At worst, it was another way for a small group of men to hold sway over a significantly larger of people, politics with more elaborate costumes. Either way, it had nothing to do with any life after this one.

To be sure, I had taken comfort from the Church and its rituals during the days and weeks after Dad had died. By the following winter, though, my attendance at Mass had lapsed almost entirely. Even when my work schedule permitted me to take my mother and Mackenzie to church, I sat through the service listening with one ear, especially when the priest stood to deliver the sermon. Sometimes, I thought that I could have been a better Catholic if I lived in a country whose language I did not speak, so that I wouldn't realize the priest was summarizing a *Peanuts* comic to explain God's love for us. I missed the faith I'd had in my childhood, and I regretted its loss because it had been so important to my father, and had remained so for the rest of my family. Its loss filled me with a kind of terror, because it had taken with it my father, consigning him to a void in which I and everyone else I knew would, in the end, join him.

XI

No surprise: that night, I dreamed of Corpsemouth. I was standing on the shore of the Clyde. It was the same, twilit time I'd encountered in all my recent dreams. In front of me, the river was at low tide, exposing an expanse of waterlogged sand studded with rocks of varying size. Behind me, the Battery Park, Greenock's riverfront park, stretched flat and green. Beyond where the water lapped the sand, a wall of yellowish fog sat on the river, veiling the opposite shore. From within the fog, I heard the slosh of water being parted by something large. Goosebumps raised on my arms as the air chilled. An enormous silhouette loomed through the fog. Fear filled

me like water bubbling into a glass. The fog churned at its edge; waves splashed the beach. A leg taller, far taller, than I pushed into view. The color of brackish water, its flesh was dried and wrapped around enormous bones. There were figures tattooed on the skin, but the creases and folds from its withering rendered them indecipherable. A second leg appeared, carrying the rest of the monster with it, but I didn't wait to see any more of it. I turned and ran for the edge of the park, which had receded almost to the horizon. Sand grabbed at my feet. I slipped on a rock and fell into another. When the giant hand closed on me, I wasn't surprised. I woke as it lifted me into the air, my heart pounding, relieved that I didn't have to see the old god's face, its terrible mouth open for me.

XII

The following day, my cousin, Gabriel, and his wife, Leslie, drove me, Mackenzie, and our Mom to Glasgow. Gabriel was Uncle Stewart and Aunt Betty's second oldest, which made him five years older than I was. The times my parents had taken my brother and sisters and me to Scotland when we were growing up, Gabriel had always been the kindest of my cousins, willing to talk to my brother and me as equals about all manner of serious subjects: nuclear war, the fate of the human race, life on other planets. He worked for the railroad, in what capacity I wasn't clear. Leslie was an elementary school teacher; she and Gabriel had been married for eight years.

After we found a parking spot, Leslie, Mom, and Mackenzie set off for Sauchiehall Street and its assorted shops, Gabriel and I for the West End Museum, a sprawling, Victorian extravagance in red stone whose center was crowned by a selection of turrets that suggested a fairy-tale castle full of treasure. The museum, I had learned from a follow-up conversation with Uncle Stewart, was where the engraved rocks removed from the burial site east of Dumbarton Rock had been sent and were currently on display. I wasn't sure why I wanted to see them; it might have been for no more complicated a reason than that my uncle had told me about them. I hadn't shared my objective with my cousin, but he was happy to accompany me across the museum's wide, green lawn.

Inside, we traversed a large, echoing gallery to the stairs to the third floor, where the exhibit on Scotland's Ancient Cultures was located. The display was at the far end of the level. It had been organized around a half-dozen modest display cases, each of which contained a handful of relics of the country's oldest-known inhabitants. Large photographs of the Scottish countryside, each seven feet high by five feet wide, had been hung in the midst of the cases. Gabriel strolled over to a display case showing the rusted blade of an old sword. In front of a picture of a shallow brook running at the base of a snow-topped mountain, I found what I had come to see.

The only thing in its case, the piece of grey stone was rectangular, larger than I had anticipated, the size of a small table. The white lettering on the glass cover identified it as having been unearthed in 1933 on Gibbon's Farm in Dunbartonshire. The description pointed out the pairs of concentric circles visible on the stone's upper right quadrant, as well as the u-shape directly below them, which I thought resembled a horseshoe. The approximate date given for the stone was 500 CE. I crouched to get a closer look at the stone, which brought me level with its base. From that position, I noticed a series of marks in the rock. At first, I took them for the scrapes and scars left by whatever tools had been used to extricate the slab. Then they came into focus, and I was looking at a row of characters. A rough square whose upper-right corner didn't connect was followed by a triangle with rounded ends, which was succeeded by a pair of parallel lines slanting from right to left. Fourth was an approximate circle with a line through its center, a crescent like a frown fifth. Last was another square, only this one's edges failed to connect in the lower-left corner, instead turning inside in a series of right angles to form a stylized maze.

It was as if I were looking at the figures through a tunnel. Everything except that patch of rock was dark. I could hear the steady click and sigh of my father's respirator, the faster, high-pitched beep of the heart monitor, the intermittent beep of a machine keeping track of some other function. I could smell the antibacterial foam we applied to our hands every time we entered his room. I could feel the thin blanket we helped him pull up because the room was too cold. My heart fluttered in my chest. I went to stand, and fell onto my butt. I looked up, and still saw the symbols on the stone. I

remembered the expression on my father's face when he showed them to me, the frustration.

Gabriel's hand on my shoulder brought me back to myself. "What happened?" he said. "Are you okay?"

"Lost my balance," I said, pushing to my feet. "I squatted down to get a better look at the exhibit, and I fell right over. I'm fine."

"So you wanted to see this, eh?" Gabriel gestured at the stone. "Let me guess: Dad told you his Corpsemouth story, didn't he? Including the part about the mysterious graveyard whose sacred stones were removed. Am I right?"

"Yes."

"You know he made up all of that."

"Not this." I nodded at the display case.

"No, but it's only a piece of rock with a couple of circles on it. There's nothing magical about it."

I was surprised by his bluntness. "I don't know," I said, "it's kind of cool. We don't have anything like this in New York."

He shrugged.

"What about the figures on the end, there?" I said.

"What do you mean?"

"These ones," I said, pointing to the half-dozen characters on the stone's base.

He bent to inspect them. "Looks like someone was playing with their penknife. What's the display say about them?"

"Nothing."

"That's your answer, then."

I was tempted to tell Gabriel about the last time I'd seen these same figures, but saying that my late father had written them on a piece of paper for me after emerging from surgery during which his heart had been stopped sounded too lurid, too melodramatic. Instead, I said, "I suppose you're right. Why don't we go see what the ladies have been up to?"

XIII

On the way to our meeting spot on Sauchiehall Street, though, past shop windows full of high-end clothes, shoes, and liquor, I asked my cousin if he truly believed his father had invented the story of Corpsemouth. “Not completely,” he said. “Dad reads all kinds of books; I’m sure he’s run across something like his monster in one of them. The king that’s in the story, Riderch, he was real, and had his castle at Dumbarton Rock.”

“But no Merlin,” I said.

“Actually, there is a story about Merlin showing up there,” Gabriel said. “What is it they say? If you’re going to tell a lie, make sure to fit as much of the truth into it as you can manage.”

“It’s not exactly a lie,” I said, “it’s a story.”

Gabriel didn’t answer.

XIV

For the rest of our excursion, which ended with dinner at Glasgow’s Hard Rock Café, and for the return drive to Greenock, which took us past Dumbarton Rock, those symbols floated near the surface of my thoughts. As far as I could remember, my father hadn’t taken us to visit the West End Museum during any of our family trips to Scotland. Nor, as far as I knew, had he gone to the place on his own; although this was difficult to the point of impossible to be certain of. He’d never mentioned it, and he’d had no trouble telling us about his visit to the Louvre, while he’d been in Paris on one of his business trips. I asked my mother about it during our dinner at the Hard Rock, delivering my question at the end of a short appreciation of the museum. “There was a lot of fascinating stuff in it,” I said. “Did you and Dad ever go there?”

A year past his death, Mom’s eyes could still shine with tears, her cheeks blanch, at the mention of my father, of their life together. She reached for her napkin, dabbed the corners of her eyes. “No,” she said, returning the napkin to the table. “I think I went on a school trip there—I don’t remember how old I was. Just a girl.”

“What about Dad?” I said. “Did his school visit the museum, too?”

“I don’t know,” Mom said. “They probably did, but he never mentioned it to me.”

“Oh,” I said. “I was wondering. Because, you know, you guys took us to a lot of museums when we were young.” Which was true.

“That’s what happens when you’re traveling with children,” she said. “No, in our younger days—BC, we used to say, Before Children—Dad and I went on picnics, or out dancing.”

So perhaps my father had been to the museum as a boy, and perhaps on that occasion he had seen the weird symbols carved on the base of the rock. And perhaps his brain had tossed up that memory as his anesthesia wore off. The last perhaps, however, seemed one too many. Yes, the mind was a complex, subtle organ, and especially after a dramatic experience, who could predict its every last response? Yet this felt more like special pleading to me than admitting that something strange had happened to my father, and whatever its parameters, it had left him with a message for me written in characters I couldn’t read.

XV

Back in Greenock, we dropped Mom, Mackenzie, and Leslie off at Stewart and Betty’s. Gabriel and I drove back to his house, in order, he said, for him to initiate his American cousin into the mysteries of the single malt. He and Leslie lived on a steep street that gave a view of the Clyde. The houses along it sat on a succession of terraces, like enormous stairs descending the hillside. He parked in a short gravel driveway, and led me first into his and Leslie’s house, to deposit her day’s purchases on the living room couch, then out a pair of French doors, into the back garden. A brick path took us through rows of flowering bushes to a wooden hut whose door was flanked on the right by a large window. A hand-painted sign over the door read gabe’s horn; under the name, the artist had drawn a simplified trumpet from whose mouth alcohol poured. My cousin opened the door, flicked a light switch within, and ushered me into the building.

To the right, a short bar stood in front of a shelf lined with bottles of Scotch, with some better varieties of vodka and bourbon to either side of them. Behind the bottles, a mirror the length of the bar doubled the size of

the room. To the left, a quartet of chairs surrounded a round table. Beyond the table, a chrome jukebox stood against the wall. Posters and pennants of the local soccer team, the Greenock Mortons, decorated the walls, with framed photographs of Gabriel and Leslie in assorted vacation settings among them. Gabriel made for the bar, which he slipped behind to survey his selection of whisky.

There were a couple of tall stools in front of the bar. I settled onto one of them and said, “This is great.”

Gabriel glanced over his shoulder at me. “Do you think so? It’s just something Leslie and me put together in our spare time.”

“It’s fantastic,” I said.

“We like to come out here after a day at work, or if we’re having friends over.”

“It reminds me of a place my dad took me to,” I said. “There was a guy who was a friend of his—through work, but he was from Scotland, too. One night, Dad had to go over to his house—to pick up something for work, I think—and he brought me along with him. I was thirteen or fourteen. This man led us down to his basement, which he had set up as a bar—though not as nice as this one. He passed my dad a glass of something—I don’t know what it was, but Dad told me afterwards that our host had not been stingy with his booze. I had a ginger ale, which he gave to me out of one of those specialized dispensers you see in real bars, with the hose and all the different buttons on top of it. I was thoroughly impressed. The guy had been in the RAF during the war—he had a couple of big pictures of planes on the wall. The three of us sat around talking about that for an hour. I felt so grown up, you know?”

“Aye.” Gabriel nodded. He had picked three bottles and set them on the bar. “I have some ginger ale in the refrigerator, but I think it’s time for something a wee bit more mature.” From under the bar, he produced a pair of whisky glasses, along with a small pitcher of water. He opened one of the bottles and tipped respectable amounts of its amber contents into both glasses. To each he added a literal drop of water. I picked up the one closest to me, and raised it to my nose. The odor of its contents, sharp, threaded with honey, was the smell of I couldn’t count how many family parties. It

was me playing waiter to my father's bartender, gathering drink orders from whichever guests were there for the latest First Communion, or Confirmation, or Graduation, and conveying them to Dad, who had opened the liquor cabinet in the kitchen and stood ready to dispense its contents. It was me returning to those guests with one or two or three glasses in my hands, delivering them to their recipients, and hurrying back to the kitchen for the next ones. It was me carrying to a particular friend a liquor my father had secured specifically for them, making sure to let them know Dad had said this was something special for them.

"Cheers," Gabriel said, lifting his glass to me.

"Cheers," I said, repeating the gesture to him.

The whisky flared on my tongue, and flamed all the way down my throat to my stomach, where it detonated in a burst of heat. Eyes watering, I coughed, and set the half-empty glass on the bar.

"You said you're not much of a Scotch drinker," Gabriel said.

"Not much as in never," I said. "Which is strange, considering it was the drink of choice at family get-togethers."

"Try sipping it," Gabriel said. "You want to be able to savor a good single malt."

"Okay." I took a more measured drink, and tasted honey mixed with something woody, almost bitter. I described it to Gabriel. "That's the peat," he said. I nodded, trying more. The flavor was not what I was used to: it filled the mouth, asserting itself as did none of the mixed drinks I'd previously had. I'd never been much of any kind of drinker, and I felt the liquor's potency before I was finished with the glass. My cousin's bar and its contents softened, their edges slightly less defined. Something inside me loosened. I said, "All right. What's wrong with your dad's monster story?"

Gabriel raised an eyebrow. "You mean Corpsemouth?"

"Yes," I said, "that. In the museum, I had the impression you were less than enchanted with it."

"Ach, it's fine," he said. "Dad's always been a great one for the stories."

"Mine, too," I said.

“That story—the Corpsemouth one—you know what it’s really about, don’t you?”

“A giant monster?”

“It’s death,” Gabriel said. “It’s a way of picturing death, of representing the way death feels to us.”

“Sure,” I said. “It’s like—there’s a line in one of Stephen King’s books—I think it’s *Salem’s Lot*—this kid is asked if he knows what death is, and he says yeah, it’s when the monsters get you.”

“Aye,” Gabriel said, “that’s what I’m trying to say.”

The second Scotch my cousin served tasted less of honey and more of smoke, and something peppery. The knot within me that had started to loosen slid away from itself. Gabriel leaned across the bar and said, “So. How’re you finding it, being here?”

The row of strange symbols flickered behind my eyes. “It’s different than I was expecting,” I said.

“It’s bound to be.”

“Yeah. It’s funny. I thought that coming here would let me feel more in touch with my dad. Granted, it’s only been a few days, but so far…”

“You don’t.”

“I don’t.”

“How could you? You didn’t know him here. You knew him in America. It’s okay.”

“Maybe you’re right. If that’s the case, then what am I doing here?”

“You’re with family.”

“Yeah,” I said. “I didn’t have much of that when I was growing up, you know? It was just the six of us. It’s kind of nice.”

The third and final Scotch Gabriel poured was thinner, the peat combining with a briny flavor to give the liquor an astringent taste so blunt it was oddly appealing. “Thank you,” I said to my cousin, speaking with the deliberation of someone whose tongue was heavy with alcohol. “I appreciate you sharing your expertise with me.”

“I’m hardly an expert,” Gabriel said.

“Regardless. You know what’s funny?”

“What?”

“I can picture my dad enjoying the whole Corpsemouth story. It reminds me of movies we watched when I was a kid, *The Golden Voyage of Sinbad*, *Clash of the Titans*, *Dragonslayer*—these stories about heroes fighting enormous monsters.”

“I suppose,” he said.

“Well, you two appear to be having a merry time,” Leslie said. She was standing in the open doorway to the bar.

“We were talking about monsters,” I said.

“I’m sure you were,” she said. “Stewart gave me a lift home. I’m not rushing you out, but he says if you want, he can run you back to your Gran’s.”

“That is probably a good idea,” I said. “I’m fairly confident I’ve reached my limit for alcohol. Honestly, I think I passed it a while ago.”

I thanked Gabriel for his generosity with his spirits, and him and Leslie for having squired my mother, sister, and me around Glasgow, today. “We’ve got to have you back for another tasting before you leave,” Gabriel said.

“From your mouth to God’s ear,” I said.

XVI

Outside, night had fallen, the last of the gloaming retreated to the horizon. Stewart was waiting in his Micra at the end of the driveway. I lowered myself into the front passenger seat. He’d been listening to a news program on the radio; as I buckled my seatbelt, he turned it off. “And how was your education?” he said.

“Great,” I said. “Gabriel introduced me to some quality stuff.”

“Aye, he’s a great one for the single malt, our Gabriel.” He released the parking brake and reversed into the street. “Are you up for a wee jaunt?”

“Sure.”

“Good man.” He shifted into first and started downhill.

“Where are we headed?” I said.

“The river.”

“Oh.”

The whisky I’d consumed made the steep road seem almost vertical, the Clyde below rather than ahead of us. Retaining walls raced toward us and swerved right and left. The river grew larger in fits and starts, as if it were a series of slides being snapped into view. The car’s engine whined and growled as Stewart worked back and forth among the gears. If not calmer, I was at least less terrified than I would have been without the Scotch insulating me.

At the foot of the hill, the street leveled and ran straight to the river. One hand on the steering wheel, Stewart depressed the car’s lighter and fished a cigarette from the packet in his shirt pocket. Rows of squat apartment houses passed on either side. Stewart lit his cigarette and drew on it till the tip flared. Exhaling a cloud of smoke, he said, “Did you see that stone in the museum?”

“I did,” I said.

“Not much to look at, is it?”

“I don’t know. When you think about what it represents—how old it is and everything… I’m glad they have it at the museum, but it’s kind of a shame they couldn’t leave it where it was.”

“Aye.”

“The exhibit said no one’s sure exactly what the symbols on it mean. Maybe images of the sun.”

“They’re for binding,” Stewart said.

“Binding?”

“Aye, for keeping a spirit or a creature in one place. You bind them by the sun and the moon. That’s why there’s two sets of circles on the stone. It’s a very old rite.”

“What was bound there?”

Stewart shot me a sidelong glance. “I told you and your sister yesterday.”

“Corpsemouth? For real?”

He nodded.

“I thought that was…”

“A story?”

“Yeah. No offense.”

“There was something called up at Dumbarton Rock when Riderch was king. It was older than ancient, and it was terrible. Maybe it was summoned to help the king against his enemies. Maybe it was summoned to fight Riderch. Maybe someone was playing around and opened a door that should’ve been left shut. It took a powerful man to send the thing back where it belonged, and lock the gate after it. That stone was part of the locking mechanism.”

“Wait. You’re serious.”

“I am.”

“But…”

“That’s impossible? Ridiculous? Insane?”

“I’m sorry, but yeah.”

“It’s all right. I wouldn’t expect you to believe it, even with a few drams in you.”

We had crossed the major east-west highway through town and come to a short road, which passed between an inlet of the river on the left, and a couple of apartment buildings on the right. Stewart drove to the end of the road, where a chain link fence sectioned off a stretch of pavement that went another twenty yards to the river. He parked the car and exited it. I followed. This close to the water, the air was cool bordering on cold. While Stewart popped the trunk, I surveyed the fence, which continued to the right, guarding the edge of a much larger paved area, which was filled with large metal shipping containers, some of them sitting on their own, others stacked two and three high. In the near distance, a trio of cranes faced the Clyde, weird sentinels looking out over the dark water. Tall sodium lights gave the scene an orange hue that made it appear slightly unreal.

Behind me, Stewart shut the trunk. He was carrying a pair of metal poles, each about a yard long, one end wrapped in duct tape. “Here,” he said, handing one to me.

I took it. The pole was hollow, but heavy. “What’s this?”

“Protection.”

“From what?”

“Come this way.” He set out to the right. I hurried after. Together, we walked the fence for a good hundred yards, until we came to a wire door set in it. The entrance was locked, but Stewart withdrew a ring of keys from his trousers, which he thumbed through until he arrived at one that slid into the lock and levered it open. The door’s hinges shrieked as he pushed it in. I cringed, expecting the angry shout of a security officer. None came. Stewart stepped through. I pushed the door closed behind us, to minimize suspicion.

Keeping to the shelter of the containers, Stewart and I made our way across the paved expanse, he moving quietly, gracefully, I with the exaggerated care of someone contending with too much alcohol. We headed steadily in the direction of the river. A light mist floated around us, waist-high. This close, the cranes were gigantic, monumental. Stewart stopped, raised his hand. “Do you hear that?” he said quietly.

“What?”

“Listen.”

Ahead and to our left, on the other side of a pair of stacked containers, something scraped over the pavement. Holding the metal pole in both hands, the tip low, as if it were a sword, Stewart crossed to the metal boxes. I kept a few steps behind, in a half-crouch. He moved right, to one end of the containers. The sound continued in alternating rhythm, a short scrape followed by a longer one. Before continuing to the other side of the boxes, Stewart stopped and ducked his head around for a look at whoever was there. He jerked back. Closing his eyes, he inhaled, then blew out. He murmured something I couldn’t hear, raising and lowering the end of the pole while he did. As the light played up and down the metal, I saw writing on it: the symbols I had seen in the Glasgow museum, on a piece of paper in my father’s hospital room. Heart lurching, I straightened. I tilted the pole I was holding back and forth, and sure enough, there were the same half-dozen characters cut into it. In an instant, I was sober, the effects of Gabriel’s drinks swept away by the sensation of standing within the current of something immense and strange.

“Right,” Stewart said. “There’s something coming up to the end of this box. When it reaches us, I’ll step out and see to it. You shouldn’t need to do anything. This one isn’t big. If it gets past me, though, you’ll have to slow it down. Go for its legs, but mind its hands. Here we go.”

The scraping was right next to us. Stewart moved out into the alley formed by our containers and one beyond it. As he did, he pivoted, slashing the pole from right to left at whatever was still hidden from me by the edge of the container. There was a heavy crunch, a sharp clang, and the pole flew out of Stewart’s hands, ringing on the pavement to his right. A wooden club swung at him from his left. He ducked, but it caught him high on the shoulder with sufficient force to knock him from his feet. He landed hard.

I took a deep breath and stepped out from the container, in front of Stewart’s opponent. I couldn’t bring myself to strike someone I hadn’t seen, but I held the pole up in what I hoped was a menacing fashion. I intended to shout, “That’s far enough!” What I saw, however, stilled the voice in my throat.

It was as big as a large man. At first, I thought it was a man, dressed in a bizarre costume. Much of it was mud, thick, dripping with water. Its surface was clotted with junk, crushed beer cans, shards of broken glass, saturated cardboard and newspaper, pieces of plastic, metal, wood. Here and there, rocks studded with barnacles tumored its skin. In other spots, clumps of mussels clustered black and shining. Seaweed draped its shoulders, to either side of a head fashioned from the broken skull of either a cow or horse. The lower jaw was missing, the mouth a hole gaping in the muddy throat. The thing advanced, the scraping I’d heard the debris in its flesh rasping the pavement. I retreated. The club with which it had struck Stewart was in fact its right arm, a single piece of driftwood. Its left arm was a mannequin’s, wound in rusted wire and strands of seaweed.

This was not a man in a suit—which was impossible, and hurt to think. It swept the wooden arm at me. I leapt back, just out of reach. Stewart was on his hands and knees, grabbing for his weapon. I jabbed at the thing, trying to keep its attention. The wooden arm held straight, like a spear, it lunged at me. I sidestepped, swinging my improvised sword against the arm. With a flat clank, arm and pole rebounded from one another. The creature turned, whipping the wooden arm back at me. I went to duck, slipped, and fell. The

arm struck the container behind me with a gong. This close, the smell of the thing, a stink of sodden flesh and vegetation, made my eyes water. Swiveling on my butt, I chopped its right leg with the pole, hammering the approximate location of its knee. The leg buckled inward, tipping the creature toward me. I scrambled away from it. Attempting to maintain its balance, it propped itself on its wooden arm, but Stewart hit its other leg from behind with a blow that sent the creature crashing on its back. Before it could recover, he brought the pole down on its head like an executioner swinging his axe. The animal skull rattled across the pavement. The rest of the thing, however, continued to move, doing its best to raise itself on its broken legs, dropping mud and bits of glass, pebbles, on the ground. My stomach churned at the sight. Ignoring the body, Stewart strode to the skull. He struck it twice with the pole, cracking it into several large fragments, which he stomped underfoot until they were unrecognizable. As if it were an engine running down, the body gradually ceased its motion.

Stewart dropped the pole and crossed to the creature's remains. Careful of its rusted wire sleeve, he caught the mannequin arm at the elbow. "You take the other side," he said.

Leaving my weapon, I did as he instructed. The wood was slimy, as if it had sat underwater for a while.

"Into the river," he said, nodding toward the end of the alleyway.

Together, we hauled the heavy form to where the pavement ended at a concrete ledge. Ten feet below, the Clyde lapped at the wall. "On three," Stewart said. "One, two, three!" I threw so hard I almost overbalanced myself into the water along with the creature's body. Stewart caught my arm. "Steady, lad." What was left of the thing struck the water with a considerable splash. It sunk quickly, leaving clouds of mud in its wake.

"What about the rest—the skull?" I said.

Stewart shook his head. "Leave it there. It's better to keep it separate from the rest."

Adrenaline lit my nerves, rendering everything around me painfully sharp. "I cannot believe I am standing here having this conversation with you," I said. It was the truth. Had Stewart said to me, "You're not. This is a dream," I would have had little trouble accepting his words.

Instead, he shrugged, turned, and started in the direction of the gate we'd entered.

I joined him. "What was that?" I said.

"Corpsemouth," he said, stooping to retrieve his weapon.

"I thought he was supposed to be taller," I said, picking up mine.

"In his proper form, he is," Stewart said. "Fortunately for you and me, enough of the old binding remains to keep him from appearing that way. What he's able to do is put together versions of himself, avatars, out of whatever's lying around. We call them his fingers."

"Who's 'we'?"

"A group of concerned citizens. We came together after the war. That was when Corpsemouth first made himself known, again, once the binding stone was removed. No one knew what they were doing. It had been too long since anything like this had happened. A couple of the founders were able to lay their hands on a few old books that gave hints of how to confront the monster, but a lot of it was learn as you go."

"I'm sure," I said. "Does Gabriel know about any of this? What about the rest of the family?"

"No, that isn't how it's done," Stewart said.

"How is it done?"

"Why? Are you interested in being part of it?"

"No," I said. "No, this was more than enough."

Stewart smiled thinly.

"Was my father part of this?" I thought of those old issues of *Man, Myth & Magic*.

"No," Stewart said. "Though I wondered a few times if he wasn't aware of more than he let on."

"Does this—tonight—does this kind of thing happen often?"

"More than I'd like."

As we walked, the mist thickened around us, rendering the shipping containers, the cranes, faint, ghostly. It didn't affect Stewart's sense of

direction. He continued forward.

"What about this?" I said, holding up the pole. "Not the pipe, I mean, the writing on it."

"That depends on who you ask," Stewart said. "There's some who say that those are connected to old gods. Not as old as Corpsemouth, but not too far off. When they were young and strong, he wasn't of much concern to them. As they grew older, though, and saw themselves being supplanted by newer powers, their strength ebbed and his hungry mouth became a worry. They thought that if they gave up their divinity, the monster wouldn't want them. So they put their godhood into these symbols, and ever since, anyone who uses them has been able to draw on their power."

"Did it work? Did they escape?"

"No one knows," Stewart said. "I doubt it. Corpsemouth eats gods, but he's happy to consume whatever he can get his claws on."

Overhead, a lamp lit the mist orange. Somewhere in the distance, I heard voices, faint, indistinct.

"That's one explanation," I said. "What's the other?"

"You're sure you don't want to be part of this?"

"Is that why you brought me with you?"

"You haven't answered my question."

"Nor you mine," I said.

"Some folk say the symbols come from a fabulous city, one on the shore of a black ocean, where they were the inhabitants' most closely guarded treasure."

"That's interesting," I said, "but it's not the question I meant."

"I know," Stewart said.

Through the mist, the gate swam into view. Stewart pushed it open and walked out. I went to follow, but before I could, a shout drew my attention to the left. No more than twenty yards away, through a clearing in the mist, a white van was parked. At the sight of it, my heart knocked. I knew this vehicle, had watched it drive through my dreams. For this to be the same van was impossible, of course, but on a night such as this one had proved to

be, it could be none other. I was suddenly sick with dread and grief. To walk to the van was terrifying, but to remain in place, let alone, to leave, was worse. Legs shaking madly, I stepped toward it. Stewart said something, but whatever it was didn't register.

The mist was full of yells and calls whose locations I couldn't pinpoint. Was one of those voices my father's? I wasn't sure. The mist muffled the sounds, as if I were hearing them from the other side of a thick wall. I was almost at the van. Its interior was dark. Was it empty? Half-expecting my hand to pass through it, I reached for the handle to the driver's door. It was solid to the touch, and when I pulled, it clicked and the door opened. There was no one behind the wheel. Kneeling on the seat, I leaned into the van.

It was empty. There was no evidence of its passengers left behind; although, for a second, two, I caught the faintest odor of dried sweat and laundry detergent, the scent I'd breathed whenever I'd rested my head against my father's chest at the end of the day, when I wished him good night. Then it was gone.

I exited the van, closing the door. Stewart was standing behind me. "Is… ," I started, and paused, unable to utter the remainder of the question.

"Aye," Stewart said.

"Where is he?"

He tipped his head toward where the mist was thick. "Out there."

"So if I go there, I'll find him?"

"You might," he said, "or you might not. You could spend an hour searching this lot, or you could wander off someplace else, and be lost."

Without warning, I was crying, tears streaming down my cheeks. I felt every bit as bad as I had the night my father had died, when it seemed a spear had been driven straight through my chest, as if his death were a pin that had fixed me forever in place. To see him one more time, to speak to him, to tell him I loved him and was sorry I hadn't been a better son, was a prospect almost too much to bear. To fail, though, to walk away and not return, was not something I could do to my mother and sister. I turned from the van and headed for the gate.

The shouts and calls persisted. “What’s happening?” I said to Stewart. “What are they doing?”

“The same thing we were.”

“Corpsemouth?”

“It’s not just our world he wants to break into. There are folk on the other side who do their best to keep him out of there, too.”

“Can he hurt them?”

“Oh aye, he eats the dead same as anything else.” Seeing the expression on my face, he added, “But your Dad was always a capable fellow. I’m sure he’ll be fine.”

XVII

After the night’s events, I did not anticipate sleeping. Almost the instant I settled onto my bed, though, my arms and legs grew heavy, my eyelids struggled to stay open, and I slid into unconsciousness. For an indeterminate time, I drifted in a blank, not unpleasant place. Slowly, a long, black cord came into view. It corkscrewed around and around, the way the cord on our old telephone had. It faded, and was replaced by the interior of the white van.

This time, it was full of the handful of men I’d seen in it a few days ago. My father was among them. All of the passengers looked worse for wear, their shirts and pants torn and dirty, their arms and cheeks cut and bruised. Dad was leaning forward, a black telephone receiver held to his ear. I couldn’t hear every word he was saying, but I understood enough to know that he was saying he was okay.

With a start, I realized he was speaking to me. For the dream’s brief duration, he continued to reassure me, while I said words he could not hear. The connection, it seemed, was one way. Then the call was finished, and I was awake—though not before a last glimpse of the white van, speeding along through high, brick walls black with age, carrying my father to the next stop on his long, strange death.

Irezumi

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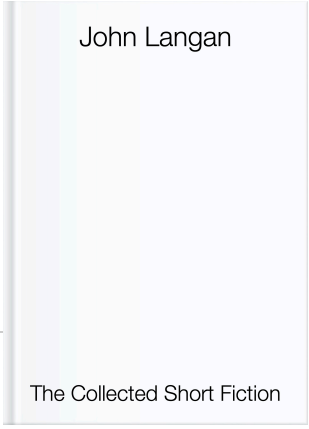

1

When the situation reached the point we were going to have to call in an outside consultant, and not just any consultant, but her, Noomi Baul, Lindstrom summoned me to the office. I wasn't nervous: I'd already decided that, if they were going to fire me, he and Molloy would have done so within fifteen minutes of my opening the attachment that pollinated the office network with the latest pictoglyph virus. If I had been another programmer, my cubicle might have been empty shortly thereafter. But as Lindstrom was fond of saying, a good—a truly good—office manager was worth at minimum a dozen programmers, so once the initial volley of expletives had flown from their office without a follow up charge from either partner, I relaxed. Truth be told, while I appreciated the inconvenience my faux-pas had caused, I assumed Sunya or Kal would be able to contain the virus and repair its damage by late morning, early afternoon at the longest, after which, my double-click would have moved from the category of 'disastrous error' to 'amusing anecdote'. I mean, these were the people who worked on the Continuing Life projects, and not the simple stuff, either: they handled the refinements of the sensory analogues. If your grandma was enjoying the best sex of her after-existence, she could thank my fellow-employees and the array of ports and windows that decorated their heads.

By the end of the day, though, the screens of the office computers were still showing the mix of constantly-changing symbols. Everything else had been put on hold—had had to be—and everyone had been reassigned to the task of getting ahead of this bug. There was no question about staying late. Throughout the afternoon, discreet calls had been made to various

competitors, some enemies, some mortal enemies, none of any help. After dinner, Molloy had contacted Homeland Security, which either he or Lindstrom should have done hours before. But Homeland was busy with something else, and once they'd ascertained that we'd implemented proper quarantine, they were the ones who recommended we talk to Noomi. I figured that was why Lindstrom had called me to the office, so that I could contact her, find out what it would cost for her to come over immediately, negotiate if I could, and set the wheels in motion.

As it turned out, I was wrong. Lindstrom had made the call himself, with Molloy beside him. There had been no negotiation, only a flat fee that would have allowed me to retire on the spot, relocate to the mountains for the rest of my natural life, and very nearly afford one of the better Continuing Life packages. In return, Noomi Baul had guaranteed that, by the time the first employee was supposed to walk in the following morning, the office system would be free of the virus and up and running. 'So what do you need me for?' I asked.

'Someone has to stay here with her,' Lindstrom said. He was looking south out of his office window, where the bay, still frothing from Hurricane Clarence, was lipping the top of the Manhattan seawall. 'Supervise,' Molloy added. The fingers of his left hand were spidering over the dermal interface on the back of his right.

'What? I don't know anything about this.'

'This level of programming, neither does anyone, here,' Lindstrom said.

'Well,' Molloy said.

'Do you know who this woman is?' Lindstrom said. He turned from the window, and I saw his left eye shining with the blue light of a Monarch lens. *Damn*, I thought, *he's actually gotten off his ass and gone in for this one*.

'I've heard of her,' I said.

'Then you're aware she's likely behind this attack in the first place. I'm not sure this is anything more than an elaborate shakedown, and believe you me, if there were any way I could avoid letting her set foot in this building, I would leap at it.'

‘But there isn’t,’ Molloy said. ‘For better or worse, we need her. And we need you to keep tabs on her.’

‘If you’re that worried about her being here,’ I began, but Lindstrom cut me off. ‘I can’t stand her,’ he said. ‘I couldn’t stand talking to her on the phone, and there’s no way I could take actually being in the same room as her. I’d murder the bitch.’

‘Nice,’ I said, ‘nice talk.’

‘You are the one with the military experience,’ Molloy said.

‘Seriously? I was an MP. You want to manage a crowd of angry North Koreans, I’m your girl.’

‘Are you saying you never dealt with drunk soldiers?’ Lindstrom said.

‘Plenty,’ I said, ‘and I had lots of help, plus things like pepper-spray and tasers.’

‘Look,’ Molloy said, ‘Angela: we’re exhausted. We’re strung out. Not to mention, neither of us likes this chick much, to begin with. It’s the perfect recipe for disaster, and we cannot afford any more disasters right now.’

‘What makes you think I’m not exhausted and strung out, too?’

‘I’m sure you are,’ Molloy said. ‘But you obviously don’t have the baggage with this girl that we do. Plus, you are kind of the one who caused all of this to happen.’

‘Ah,’ I said. ‘You realize that was an accident.’

‘An accident that’s practically wiped us out,’ Lindstrom said.

‘That’s a little melodramatic,’ I said.

‘Angela,’ Molloy said, ‘we need you to do this. Okay?’

What else was I going to say? ‘Okay.’

2

Noomi Baul didn’t step out of the elevator until quarter to one. With no web access, there was nothing for me to do except page through the tablets in the waiting area. There was an article I’d wanted to read about the Mob’s involvement in the construction of the Brooklyn seawall, so I caught up on

that over a takeout from the better Indonesian place. By the time the elevator door retracted, I'd also finished a piece about how the continuing fallout from the Indo-Pakistani nuclear exchange was complicating efforts to reclaim Bangladesh, and a review of the second *Star Wars* opera. The cleaning bots had completed their circuit of the office, and I was brewing a pot of the good coffee. Behind me, an accentless voice said, 'You're Angela?'

I hadn't been completely forthcoming with Lindstrom. I hadn't just heard of Noomi Baul: since her name had first appeared on my personal radar, in a report on the Big Hack of Chinese State Security, I'd read, watched, and plugged into everything I could find about her. Not out of concern for our security: for one thing, there were a couple of guys, Zilur and Rab, who were paid a good deal (maybe too good a deal, considering the day's events) to attend to the office network's protection. It was not, as Lindstrom liked to remind me whenever I expressed my concerns, my purview. For another thing, I didn't think that Lindstrom and Molloy, Inc., qualified for Noomi's attention. While the projects for which we were contracted had applications beyond—sometimes far beyond—their avowed purposes, there were plenty of other companies whose activities placed them several steps closer to the realm of the out-and-out unethical. Of the various movements to which she'd been linked, none had expressed anything more than vague disdain for the Continuing Life set ups (and how much do you want to bet half their own grandparents and parents were either signed up for or already in one?). For a third thing, the more I learned about her, the more convinced I was that, were Noomi Baul to crosshair us, we'd be so many blue screens.

She looked like her pictures. Dressed in black, from her Doc Martens to her jeans to her short raincoat, she almost could have passed for a Manhattan hipster, except that on her, the color wore differently. Most people choose black to make them appear taller, paler, and of course, thinner. Noomi Baul's clothes added substance to her, made it seem as if she occupied more space than she actually did. Even with the hood of her raincoat up, shadowing her face, the row of silver rings threading her left eyebrow, the silver stud raising from her right nostril, shone. In an environment where the personal ornamentation of choice was the data port, the broad-spectrum window, her jewelry seemed retro to the point of antique. She stood with

her right hand extended, and as I took it, I felt the collection of rings crowding her fingers. ‘Hi,’ I said, talking too fast, ‘you must be Ms. Baul. Thank you so much for coming on such short notice.’ I released her hand. ‘Can I offer you anything? Coffee? I just put on a fresh pot.’

‘That would be lovely.’

While I retrieved a mug from the cabinet, I said, ‘So I’m sure Ethan and Seth told you, but our network’s infected with some version of the pictoglyph virus. I assume it’s the latest one, because no one here had any idea how to deal with it. And before you ask, I’m the idiot who clicked on the message that infected our system. How do you take your coffee?’

‘Black, two sugars.’

‘Right. But now you’re here, and everything’s going to be fine.’ I handed the mug to her. ‘I assume you’ll want to get started right away, so if you’ll follow me…’

Sunya’s station had been selected for Noomi’s use, in part because she preferred her screen on its largest setting, thus making my surveillance of Noomi’s work on it at least slightly less obvious. Placing her coffee to the right of the touchpad, Noomi lowered herself into Sunya’s chair. Hands in her lap, she stared at the columns of symbols effervescing on the screen. At various points throughout the day, I’d done the same thing, watched characters come and go almost too fast to register. A capital A gave way to a cartoon eye, which left to make room for a piece of Kanji, which surrendered to an equals sign, and so on. The longer I’d gazed at the shifting symbols, the more convinced I’d become that there was some kind of pattern, some kind of logic, at work in what I was witnessing, and if only I could see through to it, the apparently random information in front of me would yield to sense. It was an additional danger of the virus, what the news was calling logarithmic hypnosis; fortunately for me, no one in the office had let me stay in one place long enough for it to take hold.

Noomi’s fingers fluttered on the touchpad. At half a dozen points on the screen, blue highlighting boxed symbols. Although they quivered, the characters remained in place, as did the ranks around them. Noomi leaned forward. A wave of her hand over the touchpad, and everything except the highlighted figures blanked. I stepped closer. Noomi arranged the symbols

in a horizontal line. I couldn't identify them, couldn't guess at what part of the globe had produced them—if they were even language in the first place. They as much resembled the kinds of esoteric marks you run across in exotic physics equations. Noomi slid her fingers on the pad, and the characters moved one in front of the other, until only the second symbol from the left remained untouched; to its right, its fellows had been layered into a new figure, a kind of lattice whose margins were a mess of loops and squiggles. Noomi reached for her coffee.

I had no clue what she was doing. To be honest, I was trying to remember how to subdue an unruly individual. I'd only had to do so once, in Pyongyang, to a former North Korean army officer who'd become violent when the relief supplies ran out before he and his family reached the head of the line. He'd been too malnourished to be much of a threat. I was less certain about Noomi Baul. Assuming she was intent on causing trouble, she wouldn't have walked in here without thinking she could defend herself. She wouldn't have been able to carry traditional weapons past the building's security system, but there were a host of low-detection options available to whoever cared to seek them out, from a paper-knife to a zipsword. Should a network alarm sound, I judged my best move to step in behind Noomi and clap her ear; if that wasn't enough, and especially if I saw her reaching for a weapon, a hammer fist to her collar bone would render that arm useless.

All of which was predicated on her tripping one of the alarms. From what I understood, Zilur and Rab had mined the most important areas of the network with safeguards obvious and imposing and safeguards hidden and fiendish. Considering the course of the day thus far, however, I was less optimistic than I might have been; at this point, it would be just my luck to have Noomi Baul wreak havoc on our system while I sat and watched her.

Her coffee finished, Noomi returned the mug to the desk and began to work the rings off her left hand, placing each one beside the mug. When the fingers of that hand were bare, she did the same for her right hand. The mug surrounded by silver circles, she reached up and drew back her hood.

Despite myself, I gasped. Of course I'd read about the tattoos—without fail, every article about her, no matter how brief, mentioned them. Still photos of them, let alone any kind of video, were impossible to find. Noomi

refused all requests to photograph them, and thus far had frustrated efforts to sneak an image by keeping her head covered, with either the hood of whatever jacket she was wearing, or a knit black cap. An artist for the *Times*‘ Sunday magazine had drawn her head in pen and ink, but she’d done so in three-quarter profile, spending more attention on Noomi’s brow and earrings, her nose stud, than on the tattoos that wrapped her shaven head. They were—positioned where I was, I could see how the slender black lines arced across the bare expanse of her skin, curling back on themselves, leaping ahead to intersect one another. The overall design was impossible to grasp. I had read the tattoos compared to vines, to script, to the coils of a snake or dragon, once to the tentacles of a jellyfish. Seeing them in person, I could understand each of those figures. It was as if her skin had been imprinted with a language that was itself a living thing. She had appeared on the New York scene with the tattoos, and yet they shone as if they’d been inked last week.

‘Come here,’ Noomi said, waving me towards her. ‘This is unusual.’

‘What is it?’ Even as I moved beside her, I was thinking, *Terrific: so we have the version of the virus she can’t deal with. And her fee’s non-refundable.*

‘There.’ With her left hand, she pointed at the pair of symbols on the screen; with her right, she caught my wrist. Her skin was fever-hot. I looked down, and saw the black lines rushing over the back of her hand, spilling along her fingers. The sight was enough to freeze me for a second; by the time I was pulling out of her grip, it was too late: the streams of ink had run onto my wrist. There wasn’t much pain, but all control of my muscles left me. I watched the tattoo writhe up my forearm, and then my vision dimmed, like a screen being dialed off.

3

Although I wasn’t exactly conscious, I retained sufficient awareness to sense time passing. Somewhere deeper in my brain, my sergeant berated me for having fallen for so obvious a ploy. ‘You could at least have made her work a little bit,’ she shouted.

When my surroundings brightened, I expected to find myself in the office, Sunya's station empty, some kind of neo-anarchist slogan scrolling across her screen. Instead, I was in a low-lit space whose dimensions I could not estimate but which gave the impression of considerable size. Directly in front of me, Noomi Baul, her hood up once more, sat behind a bulky wooden desk whose thick coat of varnish looked sticky as molasses. To her right, a man and a woman stood side-by-side, unmoving. He was tall and lanky, Scandinavian-pale; she was short and slender, Southwest-Asian dark. Both were dressed in clothes that had been less out of fashion ten years ago. To Noomi's left, a metal chair shone dully.

My heart was pounding, my mouth dry. I tried speaking. 'Where is this? Where have you taken me?'

'Nowhere.'

'Look,' I said, 'this is not the time to be cryptic. I don't know what you think you're doing, but the moment you and whoever else dragged me out of the office, you set off a metric shit-ton of alarms. Wherever this is, I'm guessing you have about two minutes left before our security come crashing through your front door. These guys do not fuck around. Do yourself a favor, and let me go, immediately.'

'We haven't left your office,' Noomi said. 'No alarms have been tripped.'

It's kind of embarrassing to admit that it took me this long to understand. 'This is virtual?'

Noomi touched her finger to her nose. 'The tattoo.'

She nodded.

'Goddamn,' I said. For someone working for a company whose major stock-in-trade was refining the virtual experience, I hadn't been inside much for years, since the training scenarios they'd run us through in the Army. Ironic, I know. At Knox, the simulations had seemed fairly realistic, although I'd never mistaken any of it for the real thing. This was different. Had Noomi wanted to feed my initial impression, encourage me to believe I was in some warehouse down by the seawall, I'm reasonably sure I wouldn't have detected the lie. I said, 'Pretty good. You keep me here while you do whatever it is you're doing. I'm out of the way, but you haven't

triggered the alarms. Then—what? You wipe my short-term memory when you leave? Or replace it with something innocuous?'

She did not answer.

'So this was all a set-up?' I asked. 'That's what my bosses think. I wasn't sure.'

Noomi said nothing.

'I mean, it didn't make sense. Why target us? Is it some kind of financial thing? Everyone's sure Lindstrom and Molloy have offshore accounts; are you going to empty them?'

'You don't seem particularly nervous,' Noomi said, less menace in her voice than cool bemusement.

'Why should I be? If you're planning on scrubbing my memory, then I'm not a threat. Dead, I'd be much more trouble to you. If there's some kind of information you want from me, I'll tell you what I know. These guys pay okay, but not that okay. Besides, I won't have any recollection of having disclosed anything. Although,' I added, 'if you want something from me, I'm not sure why you need this.' I found I could move my hands, gestured at our surroundings. 'Couldn't you just, you know, take it?'

'Some things, yes.'

'And you haven't answered my question. Did you set us up?'

Noomi shook her head. 'My being here is entirely legitimate.'

'Then why am I in this place?'

'I don't like being watched.'

'What did you expect? This isn't the first time you've consulted on this kind of thing.'

'It isn't.'

'And you've pulled this before?'

Rather than respond to my statement, Noomi inclined her head to the desk, on which a manila folder had appeared. She opened the folder, and spread its contents over the desktop. Hard copies of newspaper articles, magazine essays, a few photographs, fanned across the wood. Their subject was the same, her. I recognized them as pieces I had read. Her eyes on them, Noomi

said, ‘Once you’d been quieted, I surveyed your short term memory. Call it a security protocol. Not much there of any interest, except for these. I assumed you must be company security, or law enforcement, or… something else. It’s not unheard of for them to have training in camouflaging their memories, so I searched more closely. Ex-military, but your connection to the Army ended when your service was completed. Interesting that you deployed to Korea, but not much traveling while you were there. The jobs you’ve held since returning have been more or less of the same, office-management variety. None have dealt with safeguarding your company’s network. That isn’t your purview, is it? No serious effort to collate what you’ve read, profile me, formulate a response should you find me your adversary. From what I can tell, you don’t believe your associates could defend themselves against me. You’re right. They couldn’t. I’ll say it: you made me curious. I could have spent more time sifting through your brain. But it seemed more expedient to bring you here and speak with you, directly. So—’

‘You want to know why I’ve read so much about you.’

‘Yes.’

‘I don’t know. Because you interest me.’

‘Obviously.’

‘Yeah.’ After a moment, I said, ‘When the news started coming out about the Big Hack, everyone was sure the U.S. was behind it. I had just completed basic and all of us were talking about it as a major win for the cyber guys. Of course we weren’t about to acknowledge what we’d done, but that was all right. After years of attacks by China, we’d struck back in one blow that had crippled their offensive capabilities—that had driven them to EMP their own hardware. People were saying this was it for the communists, which, in retrospect, was a little pie-in-the-sky. Even when you and that guy—Yoshio? Yoshiro?’

‘Yoshida.’

‘Yoshida, right—even after the two of you were implicated in the Hack, everyone was sure you’d been acting in some kind of official capacity. My guess was NSA, deep cover. That no one ever got to the two of you seemed to confirm that you were under protection, because I could not believe that

Chinese State Security would not have put taking you out at the top of their "To-Do" list.'

'You weren't wrong.'

Despite the situation, I felt a twinge of pleasure. 'Honestly, I wouldn't have been surprised if some of the folks on our side had been willing to look the other way while the Chinese went after you. Too dangerous should you decide to turn against us, that kind of thinking.'

Noomi nodded; I couldn't tell whether to confirm my further speculations or to encourage me to proceed. 'After that,' I said, 'I kept an eye out for stories about you. I assumed there had to be a horde of reporters at work filling in your history. I was right, only, no one could find anything. Prior to your appearance in Manhattan, you did not exist. Well, there was no record of you, not even a random street-camera pic, which is pretty much the same thing. I took this as further proof that you were covert ops. What with everything that had been happening in India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, there must have been a host of opportunities for a programming prodigy to be recruited by the U.S. Or, I don't know, maybe you were from Des Moines and you crashed one of the Pentagon's locked sites, earned a job offer and a new identity from the men in black. Either way, I was more interested in where you were going than where you'd been.'

'And how did my itinerary impress you?'

'At first, not much.' Her brow lowered. I hurried on: 'I mean, sure, for the next couple of years, it seemed like you were connected to every major computer-related event. The Mac Wars, the Google/BM thing, the Halliburton Raid—it got to the point that, after the first couple of lines of an article, I could predict whether you'd been involved or not, especially if someone had had to EMP their servers. It was—I wasn't sure why you were spending so much time in the corporate world. I expected the woman who'd brought down the Chinese to have bigger fish prepped for the frying pan, the Russians, say, or the Saudis. To be fair, though, it's been a long time since there's been any daylight between the multinationals and the government. When I was in Korea, there were moments, I swear I wouldn't have been surprised to see the Hyundai logo stenciled on the tank turrets. Cutting the legs out from under Mac East, shutting down the BM part of

Google/BM, imploding Halliburton, were all political acts. It was just, it was hard to figure out the ideology that knit together your choice of targets.

'It must have been after Halliburton that the *Wall Street Journal* ran that editorial, "The Most Dangerous Woman in America?" Except that the title wasn't a question, it was an assertion, and a pretty panicky one at that. What the *WSJ* was forgetting was that there were plenty of rival corporations who were only too happy to watch Mac East disintegrate; beyond Mac Pacific, I mean. Those guys could bankroll their own pundits to argue that what had happened to Google was a normal part of the capitalist ecosystem. Maybe it was; I'm no economist.

'But to have the ability to affect those multinationals, those governments, to the degree that you're a threat to them, so that they have to pay attention to you—not you as part of this or that consumer demographic, but you as *you*, as a private citizen—that's more than power, it's mass, solidity. Like the song says, we're living in an immaterial world. We're all ghosts, except for you. You're real.'

Noomi Baul's brow had relaxed, her cheeks reddened. 'You're very flattering,' she said. 'And stupid.'

'Why?' I said. 'Because someone gave you your tech? I assume that's what happened. I admit, I had no idea anyone was that far along on—I'm not even sure how to describe it. Your tattoos. Who cares if you weren't the one to develop them? You're in the driver's seat, now.'

There was no change in Noomi's expression, but the already-dim lighting in her private space dipped to complete dark. A pillar of white light leapt up around the metal chair to her left. I raised my hand against its brilliance. Squinting, I could distinguish a child-sized figure seated in the chair, a trio of taller forms encircling it. Except for the fluttering thump of a heartbeat, there was no sound. The light jumped and danced, a stream of phosphorous submerging the tableau, simplifying its subjects to charcoal sketches. The tall forms moved their hands over the seated figure's head and neck. Each might have been holding something, a syringe or a scalpel, or their fingers might simply have been too long. The heartbeat raced faster, the thump verging on a hum. It was hard to be certain with all the hands scuttling over

it, but the seated figure's head appeared to be shifting, as if its skin had become sticky and were adhering to the tall forms' fingertips.

The stream of light vanished, the heartbeat ceased, and the metal chair was once more empty. The area behind Noomi, to either side of me, filled with the glow of dozens of screens. From movie-theater large to personal-entertainment small, they overlapped, forming a virtual mosaic around us. While each screen played different footage from those adjacent to it, the general subject was the same: the inundation of Bangladesh during what came to be called the '*Ek, Dui, Tin*,' the One, Two, Three, the trio of super-cyclones that had followed so close on one another's heels as to constitute practically a single storm of almost two and a half weeks' duration. To my right, one of the runway cameras at Sheikh Majib International caught a British Air Dreamliner riding an ocean swell, for all the world like an enormous surfboard, straight into the slender control tower. To my left, a Bangladeshi sailor recorded the pileup of cargo ships and supertankers as the Sanadia Island port was overwhelmed. Directly in front of me, a tourist standing on the fifth or sixth storey of their hotel filmed the first wave to reach Dhaka, a mass of water whose churning edge rose over the white wall surrounding the hotel and raced across the green lawn between the wall and the hotel. Here was the Dhaka Metro being shoved off its elevated tracks. Here was the interior of a grocery store, its windows bursting inwards in a torrent of water and glass. Here was a family crowding the roof of their house as the steep prow of a fishing boat, freed from its moorings, swung lazily towards them. Here was a satellite photo showing the new northern shore of the Bay of Bengal, a margin that encompassed eighty-nine percent of what had been Bangladesh.

I had seen the videos, the photos—first when they dominated the major news outlets, and then, after the majors had moved on to the next shiny object, when I sought them out on an assortment of local and micro news sources. I'd listened to experts insist that this was no surprise: given the rise in sea levels the past couple of decades, plus the increase in intensity and duration of severe weather events, it didn't take a genius to predict that a low-lying country with a history of cyclonic activity had been painted by the targeting laser. Yes, precautions had been taken—seawalls put up, building codes improved, evacuation routes planned—but against a disaster

of this magnitude and length, none of them had been enough. Weeks, months after the end of the storms, the typhus-3 outbreak, the convoys to India and Myanmar, I continued to search for news of the area. I'm not sure why. I was a high school junior; there wasn't much I could do aside from contribute money to the Red Cross/Red Crescent. Keeping up with what was happening seemed a way to maintain some semblance of responsibility; not looking away, I thought, had to count for something.

Behind me, the space lightened. A glance over my shoulder showed what I took to be another screen, the size of a large window. The image displayed on it was unfamiliar. In fact, it was so different from everything else connected to the Bangladesh catastrophe that I could not process it. I turned, and my head swam with vertigo, making me step back from an actual window, one so high clouds formed a carpet far below it. A late afternoon sun the color of molten bronze had sunk almost completely beneath the clouds, swelling them with orange light. Overhead, the sky was a blue-black cloth, a handful of early stars studding it in place. This had to be one of the top floors of the Al Burj, or that other building, the one in Rio whose name was not coming to me. *This isn't real*, I told myself. *You're inside.* The problem was, inside felt exactly like outside, and if the only thing delineating the fantasy of one experience from the reality of another was my say-so, that standard seemed distressingly weak. Dropping my gaze, I did a careful about-face.

The screens, desk, Noomi: everything was gone. In its place was an office whose downscale furnishings were distinctly out of keeping with what the rent on a location like this had to be. Shelving units, some tall and thin, some short and squat, filled the distance between me and a trestle table behind which sat an old man. Toys crowded the shelves, the table, the vast majority of them the bright, cheap productions of whatever emerging economy they had been outsourced to. Similarly shabby, the old man was wearing a battered porkpie hat and a threadbare tweed jacket over a red and white checked shirt buttoned to the top. His face was long, his ethnicity indistinct. His large hands fumbled with the cap of a small, purple bottle. I thought of a vendor at a flea market. The old man succeeded in twisting the cap off the bottle, whose contents he tipped into a shallow dish in which rested an elaborate yellow bubble-wand. He swirled the wand in the soapy

mixture, lifted it, and blew into its filmy spaces. Quivering, the liquid belled into a sphere which clung to the wand as the old man continued to fill it with his breath. From its shining surface, another bubble raised, and another, until the first sphere had become the center of a cluster of spheres. The old man gave a final puff, and the bunch floated free of the wand, across the table, and towards me.

To my left, a voice said, ‘You are Ms. Rasmussen.’ From what my peripheral vision had registered as a block of shadow but which I realized was an unlit passageway, a second man stood observing me. His suit, shirt, tie were of such a piece with the shadow that, had he not announced himself, he could have remained there without me noticing him indefinitely. His face was dark. I don’t mean African; I mean it was difficult to see, as if there were a veil floating in front of it. The man didn’t wait for me to answer him. He said, ‘I understand that you have adapted to the graft.’

I’d already figured out that I was viewing one of Noomi’s memories up close and personal, which meant there was no point to my talking or otherwise attempting to interact with the characters before me. I did not anticipate the images that would surge through me at this man’s words: an elderly Asian woman’s face, its benign expression set askew by the mono-goggle slowly rotating over its left eye; a thick, transparent wall whose outer surface was covered in what appeared to be red graffiti; a pair of slender bare arms under whose skin black lines spread like vines. Accompanying the scenes was a spasm of plasma-hot rage that trembled for me to express it.

If the man in the shadows noticed the emotion, he chose not to acknowledge it. He said, ‘You are ready to enter the employ of my associate and myself.’ He nodded to the man at the table, whose hands roamed its top, pushing toys this way and that. ‘You may consider this your introduction to your new position. You join us at a time of some crisis. For several years, now, my associate and I have been at loggerheads with a former partner of ours. Perhaps you are aware that there are no feuds fiercer than those between old friends; certainly, that is the case, here. Our conflict stems from a plan the three of us developed for putting the interests of ourselves and a select few in a position of permanent advantage. As we saw it, our prosperity could best be secured through extensive and fundamental

modification of our surroundings. The project's details are unimportant. Suffice to say, it was ambitious and, like all such undertakings, utterly ruthless. My associate and I trusted our colleague with the implementation of the plan's finer details; although I was not averse to dirtying my hands when necessary. Indeed, there were moments I rather enjoyed it.'

Without looking at it, the old man picked up an oversized, neon-green, plastic egg that snapped open at the middle, releasing a mass of bright blue goo all over his fingers. Thick, mucousy, the goo dripped and dangled from his hands. He smeared it over the tabletop, wiped what was left off on his jacket.

'That was the problem,' the other man said, 'in a word, *pleasure*. As we conceived it, our interests would best be served by a more…austere setting, one scoured clean of all manner of…' the man waved his hand, 'everything. How could we know—posed of us, the question sounds absurd, but how could we know that the same circumstances we sought to develop to our preferences would be transformed in ways vastly more conducive to our ongoing success by the agencies of—well, of essentially the lab rats? Left to their own devices, driven by nothing more grandiose than ignorance and venality, those in authority had shaped this environment into one in which we could thrive. The swollen seas, the heated air, supersaturated with two centuries' worth of industrial byproducts; the blackened earth, charred and cracked by the weapons of your wars large and small; the crumbling cities, overcrowded with the hapless and destitute: for variety, your accomplishments could not be surpassed. Nor had we anticipated the brute satisfaction we would take wandering through your achievements. Neither my associate nor I like to be precipitate in our actions, but neither do we like to remain on a course that has so clearly been superseded. Accordingly, we abandoned our original designs in favor of what had been dropped in our laps.'

Wait, I thought, *what is he saying?* I tried to concentrate on the man's words, but the rage that had shot through me had pooled high in my chest, where it glowed like so much magma ready for eruption. I was aware of myself—of Noomi—struggling not to contain, but to delay, its venting.

The man in the shadows said, 'The majority of our fellow travelers accepted our decision. When all was said and done, a single holdout

remained, and that was our old colleague. Always the project's most enthusiastic supporter, he had become zealous in his adherence to it. Our relations with him deteriorated, until our one-time friend departed the company to continue his implementation of our discarded plan. I suppose we might have gone our separate ways and let that be that, but there are no truly separate ways, are there? From the moment he attempted to realize what had become his project, our former colleague had come into conflict with us. It does not do to be sentimental: we initiated a range of countermeasures. Embarrassing as it is to admit, the Zealot, as we had come to call him, anticipated our moves and thwarted them.'

With a grunt of what might have been satisfaction, the old man held up a pocket-sized transistor radio. He ran out the antenna and rolled the volume dial. High-pitched, atonal trilling spilled out of the speaker—flutes, I thought, although you couldn't call the sounds they were producing music in any but the broadest possible sense of the word. Nodding, the old man pressed the radio to his right ear.

Up and down my arms, skin raised and lowered as if I had the worst case of goosebumps, ever: the tattoo, I realized, shifting.

The man in the shadows said, 'During his time with us, the Zealot recruited a considerable number of assistants. When he split from us, his acolytes left with him. This was no surprise: from the start, our former colleague had offered a…generous benefits package to his assistants. They gave him a tremendous tactical edge, which he employed in a wide range of situations. My associate and I were running from one place to another continuously, putting out the fires they were starting. This would not do. We began a recruitment drive of our own.

'It was as part of this ongoing process that we encountered the work of Dr. Akihiro. These last few decades, the Zealot's people have focused their energies on the internet, whose possibilities they have exploited to their considerable benefit. The doctor's work on more sophisticated user interface systems promised to shift the balance of what had become a costly and difficult campaign in our favor. All that she required was a suitably responsive technology. She had experimented with organic machinery, only to reject it as too intractable. It so happened that my associate and I numbered among our holdings an organism uniquely adapted to the doctor's

needs. Overtures were made, offers accepted, and she was brought into our service. With our resources at her disposal, Dr. Akihiro was able to succeed with what she called her *irezumi*. All that was left was to locate and secure an appropriate recipient for the doctor's special tattoo.

'This proved a challenge. We—I don't imagine the history of our clinical trials will be of much interest to you, except insofar as it encouraged us to direct our attention to younger subjects. Our requirements received an unexpected boost when your native land was submerged, not to mention, when its larger neighbors finally allowed their cold war to heat to thermonuclear temperatures. Suddenly, it was, you might say, a buyer's market. With an abundance of prospective recipients lined up outside her door, Dr. Akihiro was able to move forward with widespread testing.'

Another string of images flickered behind my eyes: looking down at the heavy bodysuit restricting my motion, its yellow surface studded with blinking white lights; a forest of pins rising from my arms, the top of each sprouting a thread of wire that tethered it to a bulky console to my right; an ocular jack lowering towards my left eye, the half-dozen needles ringing its circumference locking into position. The pool of magma in my chest swelled.

The man in the shadows said, 'For a time, it did seem as if, the nearer we drew to success, the slower grew our approach. One moment, all would be proceeding apace, and then the interface systems, the doctor's *irezumi*, would…rebel. Sometimes the test subject was complicit, sometimes not. Either way, their final moments were not pleasant.

'That, however, was before *you*. I will admit, when the doctor showed me your results on the upper-level training exercises, I was dubious that such consistent ferocity could lead to anything other than another failure; indeed, I almost suggested we excise you then and there. Had it not been for Dr. Akihiro's pleading…What a pleasant surprise to find that someone so young—and, let us be frank, so traumatized in so many ways—could muster such self-discipline. You have resisted the temptation to foolish action that has undone so many of your predecessors, and while I am vaguely curious to know why, your motivation is of less consequence than your ability. That ability has brought you here.' The man nodded at the office, its shelves of cheap toys, his associate hooting softly as he continued

to press the transistor radio to his ear. The muscles in my face trembled with my effort to withhold emotion from it. The tattoo—the *irezumi*—prickled with what I recognized as anticipation.

'You,' the man in the shadows went on, 'are to be our left hand. You will defend our interests. You will frustrate and stall our rival's designs. When the opportunity presents itself, you will strike at his interests. You will be permitted considerable latitude in your approach to individual situations, as long as the final result favors us. There is no need for me to threaten you against failure: should you fall short in any of your contests with the Zealot's forces, they will see to your disposal. Undoubtedly, at some future point, they will get the better of you. Even so, it's not as if your prospects as a refugee were significantly brighter, and in the meantime, you can enjoy a comfortable existence. If you are the kind of person who takes comfort in such things, then you can console yourself with the knowledge that you will be spending your time serving a worthy cause.

'Of course, I suppose our former colleague would offer much the same solace.'

My muscles tensed, and in a burst of images that she had kept under lock and key until this moment, Noomi's plan was disclosed to me. A lunging back fist to the man in the shadows' face, followed by a stepping chop to his throat. Press her hand to whatever portion of his flesh was available; inject the *irezumi* and use it to trip his nervous system into seizure. Go for the old man and repeat the process. Raid the partners' thoughts for whatever information might come in handy, fibrillate their hearts, and get out of here. A moment more, and the rage in my chest would come streaming out.

The man in the shadows said, 'The details of your new life will be explained to you in mind-numbing detail by Ms. Lindsay when she returns to fetch you. You are here—to be candid, you are here because my associate and I wished to indulge a desire to see you in the—enhanced—flesh. Having forged our blade, we wished to admire it, to observe our reflections in its surface. That, and we wanted you to see—'

For a moment, my surroundings lost focus. Then, it was as if I were at the eye doctor and she rotated the correct prescription into place. The office was gone, replaced by a vast, dark plane. Both the man in the shadows and

the old man had remained, but behind each, an enormous black shape loomed. The man in the shadows stood at the foot of a monument that would have put the Statue of Liberty to shame. Struck from obsidian polished to trap what light there was within its acres of skin, the statue was of a man wearing a giant, gold mask whose design suggested the burial mask of an ancient pharaoh. Huge as the thing was, it was dwarfed by what raised in back of the old man, a jagged heap of rock that looked as if it had been torn fresh from the Himalayas. The air was full of music, the same atonal cacophony the old man had been listening to, but exponentially louder, as if played on flutes carved from redwoods. I did not understand what was happening. Obviously, Noomi had been flipped into some kind of virtual setting, but through what means, I couldn't tell.

Under my feet, the ground trembled. The great, golden head of the statue was moving, tilting its blank face downwards. At first, I thought the structure was breaking apart, but the head remained attached as its titan eyes rolled in their sockets. I could feel its gaze churning across the plane in my direction. It crashed over me like a wall of water.

Submerged in its notice, I was submerged in it. The statue vanished, as did the man in the shadows, each of them no more than a mask, a mediation for something that enveloped me like a great, dark ocean. I saw—I didn't see so much as my brain translated what I was experiencing into sight. I was shin-deep in what might have been the foam of a wave's furthest reach up the beach, except that this foam spread in all directions, indefinitely. Nor was it composed of water; instead, rings of light, each barely wide enough to fit my pinky, shook and shimmered one beside the other. There were thousands of the rings in my immediate vicinity, hundreds of thousands a little farther out, millions and hundreds of millions beyond that, a billion, a hundred billion, more numbers too large to be any more than abstractions, in the distance. Where the individual rings blended into a glow, something hung above them. It was too distant and too dim for me to see too much of; what caught the light reminded me of one of those fractal screensavers you still run across, lopsided globes that flatten and drain down their own centers. Even this far removed, most of it invisible, it nauseated me, the little of it I glimpsed making me feel as if I were folding in on myself. I looked away, and saw movement nearer. From the gaps between the rings

of light, slender tubes rose into view, swaying with the lazy motion of undersea plants swept by the tide. At first, that was what I took them for, some kind of flora native to wherever this was; then one of them corkscrewed forward and down, sinking its top into the space between two rings and lifting what had been its base into view. Other tubes repeated the motion—all of them were repeating it—the mass of them was crawling towards me. I thought of a clump of earthworms squirming across a muddy field. I'm not sure what it was, what hitch in their collective movement, that made me realize what I was looking at was not an abundance of individual organisms, but a single creature broken into an indefinite number of segments. Organism wasn't even the right word, but I didn't know what was. A sensation too primitive to be emotion poured off the thing in waves, a lack so fundamental as never to be met, no matter what the remedy. It struck the rage molten in my chest like a blast of liquid nitrogen, cooling, hardening, and crumbling it to powder in an instant. The thing hungered, and its hunger was a great whirlpool spinning down to the ocean floor, threatening to sweep me into it like so much flotsam. A want that profound wouldn't even notice when it consumed me. It could strip the flesh from my bones, drain the air from my lungs, taste my final thoughts as they sparked between neurons—more, it could peel my experiences from their settings, scrape the meat out of them, suck the last sensation off their husks, and it wouldn't matter. It would be like trying to satisfy a starving man with a grain of rice. The absence the thing encompassed pulled at me. On my arms, my scalp, the *irezumi* writhed, a nest of snakes trying to tear through my skin. The pain was awful, and then it tore me apart.

4

The office coalesced around me to the sound of someone speaking, a stream of words that went, 'Oh God oh Jesus oh Christ oh fucking Christ what the fuck what the motherfucking fuck oh motherfucker oh you oh God oh Jesus,' and so on. I was seated in Sunya's chair, at her work station. Noomi Baul was standing to my right. Sunya's screen was up, the Lindstrom and Molloy logo centered on it. 'What the fuck what the motherfucking fuck.' I looked at Noomi, but her lips were not moving.

Mine were. Once I realized this, my litany of invectives gave way to, ‘They’re not—’

‘They aren’t,’ Noomi said. ‘They more aren’t than are. You could call them aliens; although even that makes them sound more familiar than they are. As far as I’ve been able to work out, they’re…dispositions in the structure of things, distortions proximate to the quantum foam that analogize intelligence. If you were to call them gods, you wouldn’t be completely wrong; nor would you be if you called them devils.’

‘How did they—’

‘I don’t know.’

‘You—you’re—’

‘A weapon,’ she said. ‘I’ve come to take a certain pride in being a highly effective one, but that’s all.’

‘I…’

‘The pictoglyph virus builds and opens a gate,’ Noomi said, ‘which allows a stream of self-organizing, self-directing information to manifest within a network. Left unchecked—you don’t want to leave it unchecked. The only solution to a full-blown manifestation is to EMP the hardware. The problem is, once the virus has been accessed, there’s no way to stop it constructing its gate; at least, none I’ve found. What you have to do is reroute the gate’s destination to a closed network, so that when the information passes out of it, it’s confined to a single location long enough for it to be diagnosed and wiped. The internal system of a repressive state security apparatus will do nicely, as will the private preserves of a multinational corporation—or a virtual afterlife.’

‘What—wait—you sent the virus to Continuing Life?’

‘Don’t worry: no one will be able to trace it back to here. It should take another day for the information to achieve its optimum form, and maybe six hours after that for the decision to be made to EMP it.’

‘But there are people in there,’ I said. ‘There are people’s grandparents, their great-grandparents, and children—there are children, and people who were in comas, who’ve gotten a whole new life, inside.’ I hated that I sounded like a sales rep for De Leon, Ltd., but what I was saying was true.

‘Simulacra,’ Noomi said. ‘Sophisticated replicas with which you can delude yourselves that your loved ones are not really lost to you.’

‘From what I understand, the jury’s still out on that. Even the Vatican’s stepping more lightly, these days.’

‘What does it matter? Even if those…things are some form of continuation of the human, what gives them the right to extend their existences when so many others have had theirs ripped away from them?’

I wasn’t in any state to argue the finer ethical points of a virtual afterlife. ‘I’ll tell,’ I said. ‘If the office network’s up and running, then I can have Lindstrom and Molloy on the phone, instantly. I’m guessing I can’t stop you from walking out of here, but I can make sure everyone knows what you’ve done.’

‘You might want to take a look at your right hand, first.’

‘What?’

‘It’s not a trick—go on.’

The tattoo was discreet, a black mandala on the meat between my thumb and index finger. As I watched, it wriggled ever-so-slightly, as if settling in to its new location. My stomach squeezed, my takeout burning at the base of my throat. I groaned.

‘That is my insurance policy,’ Noomi said. ‘If you should make any unwise decisions regarding what you’ve learned of me, that mark will allow me to open a gate very much like the one the pictoglyph virus builds in the middle of your brain. What will come through—to everyone around you, it will appear as if you died a very difficult and painful death from an aggressive species of brain cancer. Which will be close enough to the truth for it not to matter too much.’

Only when she went to walk away from the work station did I say, ‘Why? Why show me all that—tell me—let me remember it? Wouldn’t it have been simpler to wipe my memory?’

‘You’re not without skills of your own,’ Noomi said. ‘I may have need of them, sometime. Chinese Security has a long memory. This way, it will be easier for me to call on you. Anyway, you were curious, weren’t you? And why shouldn’t you have to live with what you know? The rest of us do.’

5

One of the selling points for Continuing Life is what its developers call the At Last factor. Because of processor speeds, everything in a virtual environment happens in slices of time so small their names sound like something out of Dr. Seuss: attosecond, zeptosecond, yoctosecond. It's not quite instantaneous, but it means you can pack an awful lot of subjective experience into a little quantity of time. Combine that with a setting that maps onto the real world so closely as to leave no gap apparent between them, and in your virtual afterlife, you finally will have world enough and time. Provided you and/or your family have purchased at least a mid-level package, you can spend a week walking the corridors of the Louvre, or diving the remnants of the Great Barrier Reef, or taking a submarine tour of Venice. If you did well enough in this life to buy the next life you want, then you can try to scale Everest, or visit the Marianas outpost, or board a shuttle to one of Virgin's orbital hotels.

What most people—including, you can be sure, a good portion of the system's current and future residents—don't realize is that you spend almost all of each day in Continuing Life inactive—in power down mode, if you like. This allows your time inside to maintain parity with time outside, which is especially important if you have family or friends with whom you want to continue relations. From what I understand, the test versions of the system experimented with permitting occupants more latitude in the amount of their subjective experience, and it did not end well. Whatever human consciousness might be capable of in theory, there's nothing in our daily lives that prepares us for a thousand, for ten thousand, years' worth of life. It doesn't say much for your virtual afterlife if it causes its inhabitants to invoke their annihilation clauses, so the time ratios were scaled back and regularized.

Continuity with the life they left was more important to the system's residents than anyone anticipated. It turns out that, whatever afterlife they may have been promised by their assorted faiths, given the choice, the typical person will opt for a situation that's more or less a continuation of what they've known—maybe with a few improvements here or there, but otherwise the same. Thus the meticulous construction of a virtual world

indistinguishable from the actual one. The idea is to make it as easy as possible for the inhabitants of Continuing Life to convince themselves that their lives haven't changed that drastically.

What all of this means is that, when the gate Noomi Baul re-routed opens, the consequences for Continuing Life's residents will look and feel about what they would for you or me, were such a gate to admit something to this world. It was Noomi's parting gift to me, a look at what's already unfolding in the system. Most likely, it began with one of the inhabitants clicking an e-mail they shouldn't have. If it worked once, right? Maybe it blanked the screen, crashed the resident's interface, or maybe it did no more than cause the lights to flicker. Either way, information will pour into the network like water out of a firehose. At first, the system will treat the influx as it would a large-scale upgrade, by shunting it to those zones of zero population—the South Pacific, say—so that, should there be any problems with the information, they can be identified and addressed before they affect any of the inhabitants.

So while she drinks her morning coffee, the news channel your grandma keeps on for background noise will report seismic activity in the deep ocean. It's unlikely she'll find this cause for much alarm. Continuing Life is marketed as a dynamic environment, one whose occasional storms and even mild earthquakes provide a stimulating variety to the setting. Besides, the chances are good that she'll have selected a primary residence far inland and well-above sea level, the habits of an actual lifetime having persisted into her virtual one. The next she hears of it may be during lunch at Applebee's, when the screen over the bar will be showing satellite photos of the new land mass that's pushed up through the ocean. She won't be especially concerned. If this is supposed to be happening, then there's no reason for her to worry; if it isn't, there's a university of talented young women and men to deal with it. By the time she's discussing the island with her neighbors over dinner, and whether what appear to be buildings on it could be the work of human hands and not natural formations, your grandma may be as much annoyed as anything. This was not what she paid for, some kind of science-fiction scenario, Atlantis rising from the depths. She's here because her life ran out before she was done with it. Her intent is to watch her grandchildren grow up, and to take a refresher class in French

at the local college, so that when she visits Paris, she'll be able to ask for directions to the Eiffel Tower, herself. If this current situation continues, she may have to speak to someone.

Were she told, your grandma would take little comfort in the knowledge that, as she's turning in for the night, a room full of those talented young women and men is scrambling to deal with the threat to her home. In a matter of seconds, the information whose admission to their network none of them can explain has thwarted the system's extensive safeguards and begun reconfiguring significant portions of it. When your grandma next wakes, ahead of schedule—the result of a programmer's hypothesis that they might slow the invading information by returning the system to active mode early—it will be to disaster. The morning's news, which she will watch attentively, will struggle to keep up with events. More, and more significant, earthquake activity throughout the Pacific, pushing tsunamis towards the Hawaiian Islands, the western coast of North America. Seawalls topped, breached. Houses collapsed, swept away. Lava running out of Hualalai, Mauna Loa, and Kilauea. Mountains from the Volcan Fuego in Colima to Volcano Mountain in the Yukon spewing smoke and fire like gigantic fireworks. Mount St. Helens bursting. The Yellowstone caldera rising. She'll remain in front of the TV for the rest of the morning.

Around lunch, your grandma will attempt to contact her middle daughter, your aunt, who's typically the child she calls on when she needs reassuring. Leading with an apology, a pleasant woman's voice will tell her that the outside interface is currently unavailable and she should try it again, later. Only after she has no better luck reaching her other children, her older grandchildren, will she accept that, for the moment, she is cut off from everyone she knows in the actual world. The unease this occasions will be nudged into anxiety by her lunchtime conversation with the members of her book club, none of whom makes the slightest pretense of discussing *Persuasion*; instead, the three women and two men trade rumors like children showing off their latest toys. Underneath their sometimes fanciful particulars—the Chinese are doing this, as revenge for the Big Hack; it's Mac Pacific, sabotaging the competition for their Next Phase; it's that solar storm, messing with the hardware—the explanations share a recognition that something in their environment has gone profoundly wrong. The six of

them will still be debating whether you can die in this place when the Yellowstone supervolcano explodes. It will sound as if a sizable bomb has detonated a mile or so away. The noise will send them to the TV, on which the news anchors will be trying to re-establish contact with the crew whose helicopter was circling the caldera moments before. One of the book club members will run out the front door onto the lawn, where he will look up in all directions, until he finds what he was seeking and calls for the others to join him. When they do, and turn their collective gaze in the direction he's pointing, north-northwest, they'll witness what appears to be the top of a great, round cloud in the distance, beyond the nearer peaks. Those same peaks and their more distant brethren will take the brunt of the pyroclastic flow that radiates from the blast, but within the hour, heavy flakes of what your grandma at first mistakes for snow will be tumbling through the air, and an hour after that, thick clouds will roll across the sky, plunging the day into gloom.

What your grandma won't know—what none of her friends, none of the system's other inhabitants will know—is that Continuing Life has been locked into active mode. How, the programmers won't be able to say with any degree of certainty; though there will be plenty of theories—and blame—darting around the room. Your grandma will stay up well into the night, as the TV ricochets from disaster to disaster. The fault lines that have zigzagged up the centers of major cities, collapsing buildings as if they were made of cards. The volcanoes around the globe that have started spraying lava like fountains. The flooding that's followed the failure of seawall after seawall. There will be reports of other things happening, too. None will be especially coherent. A picture of Kilauea, a net of lightning joining its flaming crown to the black clouds roiling above, will be scrutinized for the figure that (allegedly) can be seen through the gaps in the electricity, a conglomeration of shadow that would stand skyscraper-high were it real. A short video clip of the latest tsunami swelling towards Los Angeles will be slowed to examine the dark object that appears to be moving beneath its crest. A fragment of a phone call from Vancouver will be subject to inconclusive analysis to determine the nature of the roaring in the background. Even as one of the programmers will voice the fear that no one wants to be the first to utter, that they aren't going to be able to beat

this, your grandma, responding to what sounds like an avalanche, will switch on the outside light and open her front door. She'll see the foot of mud that's buried her lawn, the flakes of it that have not stopped drifting down, tinted orange by the sodium light. Despite everything, she will find the scene momentarily beautiful, and her ability to do so will lift her spirits. Not until she's about to shut the door will she register the mountain looming in the woods beyond the lawn. There's never been a mountain there, before. Sick with dread, she'll go to close the door, already having noticed the mountain's silhouette. Before the door shuts, she'll see the giant shape taking a step in her direction.

Once the decision has been made to EMP Continuing Life's servers—the internal debates conducted; the necessary requests filed with, reviewed by, and greenlit by Homeland; the delivery of the pulse generator arranged—the actual process will take no more than thirty minutes, from the moment the agent to whose wrist the device has been shackled steps out of his car in De Leon, Inc.'s underground parking lot to the one he turns to the CEO and announces, 'It's done.' For your grandma, as for the system's other inhabitants, twenty thousand years of subjective time will have passed. She will have witnessed her world transformed beyond recognition, its every last familiar detail washed or burned away, buried under layer after layer of igneous rock. She will have fled across the ruin of her afterlife pursued by creatures beyond her ability to apprehend, enormous things whose outlines keep shifting but whose eyes are alight with malice and delight. She will not have escaped them, and the torments they will have inflicted on her will have driven her from sanity, through insanity, and out its other side. Her body will have been molded like so much clay in the hands of a mental patient, stretched and compressed and bent and twisted into forms grotesque and awful. At last, the material that used to be your grandma, what remained of her, will have been incorporated into the walls of the structure the rulers of her world have raised on the top of the planet, a travesty of angles whose reflection crowns the globe's southern pole. She will have suffered so much for so long as to have forgotten the difference between pain and herself. Were she capable of understanding what is on its way, the burst of electromagnetism that will wipe all of this away, rendering her and her world down to their constituent atoms, she would weep with gratitude.

Angie Taylor in: Peril Beneath the Earth's Crust

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Based on *The Brave Little Tailor* by The Brothers Grimm.

As she falls, Angie Taylor tries to relax. The flight pack is in power-down mode, but ready to whoosh to life at the press of the button on her right glove. She shouldn't need it for this portion of her task. The wings of her drop suit should be all she requires during her descent of the Kansas City Tunnel, a mile wide for all of its hundred miles down. After her jump, she used the wings to angle her into the tunnel's approximate center, which is where she's remained as she's plunged deeper and deeper into the Earth. It's a straight shot. There are no obstacles, no skyscraper-sized stalactites and stalagmites, no immense rock bridges, to complicate her way, as they do in the Katmandu and Buenos Aires tunnels. Anyone traveling those passages must pack into an elevator that takes half a day to complete the descent; though improvements in speed have been promised. You can't hop in one of the converted dirigibles that make the trip in a couple of hours, or, if the way is clear, zip yourself into a courier's uniform and leap into the tunnel.

October 13th, 1933, she thinks. Will this date be marked on future calendars? Maybe as Angela Taylor day (commemorating the day a lone hero plunged into harm's way to save her country from a menace unlike any it had faced before)? She hears her mother laugh, say, "No one will ever accuse you of dreaming small, Angie."

Yellow lights, set in rings around the tunnel's circumference every mile, flash past. Was that forty-nine or fifty? Close enough to halfway. She would like to check her guns, but her arms are locked in place, keeping the suit's wings extended in order to slow her fall to a manageable speed. The guns are fine; she triple-checked each one before snapping its holster shut, and that was on top of who-could-count-how-many inspections before she left

home. It's anxiety at what waits for her at the other end of her journey, combined with the boredom of having to maintain one position for so long, spurring her mind to search for a distraction, to seek reassurance in routine.

Not for the first time this week, Angie wonders if maybe she shouldn't have made such a big deal about her guns to begin with. "ABC," her mother taught her, "Always Be Confident," and while the advice has taken her to chief mechanic of the Rockefeller dirigible fleet, as well as to a bit of tinkering in the privacy of her garage, she's asked herself if maybe that confidence should have limits, if "ABC" shouldn't be followed by "DEF": "Don't Exaggerate the Facts." Yes, a single shot from one of her guns vaporized seven of the mole things pushing their snouts against her living room window. But those were seven of the smaller creatures, the ones that appeared to function as attack dogs, not the larger kind that could knock over a house with a brush of the shoulder. She couldn't say what her gun would have done to one of them, because the power relays had fried after that first lucky shot.

Which hadn't stopped her from claiming her invention had reduced seven of the huge beasts to so much powder, when her crew met for drinks at Hunter's the night after the invasion—or Incursion, as the government had christened it already. Angie supposed the name didn't matter. What did was that, during one of the overnight lulls in tunnel traffic, a small army came pouring out of it. The force consisted of dozens of the giant mole creatures, each one carrying up to half a dozen undersized soldiers on elaborate saddles. Hundreds of smaller mole things, like the ones Angie shot, accompanied them. The riders and their steeds wasted no time, attacking the work yards and warehouses ringing the tunnel's mouth. What the larger animals couldn't crush, the smaller shred, the soldiers targeted with beam weapons that liquefied steel, ignited concrete. In short order, the subterranean forces reached the dirigible yards, raking the enormous vessels with their heat rays. All twenty-two transports went up in a series of explosions that shook the ground for twenty miles around. (That trembling underfoot was the first inkling Angie, absorbed in soldering the fine circuits of her gun, had that the Incursion was underway.) The tunnel's circumference—what Angie and her coworkers called the Lip—in flames,

the invading soldiers directed their steeds toward the lights of Kansas City, laying waste to the neighborhoods of workers' homes between.

This was how Angie came by her opportunity to test her invention under live-fire conditions. She switched on the radio for news of the apparent earthquake, and was greeted by word of fires and explosions at the Lip, of foreign troops seemingly in the heartland of America, bringing with them a horde of monsters. So ridiculous did the report sound, she wondered if she'd tuned into the middle of a radio drama. But as she checked up and down the dial, the news was all the same, an attack by unknown forces who had emerged from within the Kansas City Tunnel, and who appeared to be in command of hitherto unknown animals. The hostile fighters were moving on Kansas City. Some of the stations advised their listeners to remain inside and await further instructions; others counseled immediate flight from the marauders. Angie heard the Weiters' Packard cough to life one house over. The gun still in her hand, she crossed to the door that led out the side of the garage. In the time it took her to walk around to her driveway, the Weiters piled into their car, reversed into the street, brakes squealing, and sped toward the county road. She turned her attention southwest, in the direction of the tunnel, and saw the horizon glowing orange and red.

A moment later, a pack of the mole things came charging down the street. There were seven of them, each the size of a German Shepherd, each armed with foreclaws the size of Bowie knives. They tumbled over and around one another, snuffling the pavement. When they came to the corner where Angie's modest bungalow stood, they continued in a straight line, tearing a path through her front yard, sending clumps of dirt and grass flying. Absurdly, Angie thought of the hours she had spent tending that strip of lawn. The creatures slammed into the front of the house, then set about sniffing it. Their noses found the picture window, and the animal furthest in front lifted its talons. Angie raised the gun she had spent most of the night working on, whose casing she had screwed shut minutes before she stepped out of the garage, and squeezed the trigger.

A lightning bolt leapt from the nozzle to the mole about to tap on her front window, then zigzagged among its half-dozen companions. For an instant, white light, brilliant, crackling, surrounded the creatures. They screeched in unison. The light blinked out, and the seven of them were gone, reduced to

a fall of dust and the odor of ozone. The elation that surged through Angie (*It worked!*) was followed by the impulse to run in the direction from which the mole things had come and lend what assistance she could. That more noble emotion succumbed to disappointment as she smelled burnt copper and realized the gun's single use had fried it. She retreated inside, and spent the rest of the night repairing the gun, listening to the radio's updates of the situation. Every now and again, something large passed nearby, shuddering the walls and making her work faster.

Toward dawn, the National Guard met the invaders at the outskirts of the city. Their magnet rifles and rocket cannons made a dent in the enemy's numbers, but the beam weapons, combined with the brute ferocity of the varied mole creatures, caused the Guard troops to fall back. When the Army Air Corps showed up, the situation briefly worsened. The general in command had opted to send three of the weapons platforms, and while their frames were armored against conventional threats, they were no match for the heat rays, which detonated the dirigibles like three gigantic bombs. The explosions were responsible for half as many casualties among the Guard troops below as the hostile forces.

Fortunately for that same General's career, he had scrambled a squadron of gyrocopters along with the assault dirigibles, and, on the advice of a soon-to-be-promoted Colonel, a squad of bombers, too. The leading third of the 'copters was knocked out of the air when the weapons platforms went up, but the remainder proved effective against the invaders, their maneuverability making up for their comparatively light armament. The most important function they served was keeping the hostile forces essentially in place, permitting the bombers to target them with devastating accuracy. Once their bays were empty, what Guard troops remained on the ground staged a counterattack. Aided by the 'copters, they fought the enemy back to the Lip, where a second and a third wave of bombers reduced the attackers to a quarter of what had surged out of the tunnel less than a day before. The survivors fled back into the Earth.

Everything was in turmoil. The Lip was charred concrete and twisted steel. Communications had been lost with the colonies on the other end of the tunnel, which were assumed conquered, and possibly worse. The stretch of country between the tunnel and the city was a smoldering expanse of

buildings in all stages of collapse, cratered roads, and the remains of the invading army. A few structures stood basically intact, Angie's house and Hunter's, the bar she and the other members of her crew frequented after work, among them. She could see no other place to go. The Lip was occupied by the military, who, rumor had it, were preparing a major response to the attack. The only workers allowed in were the heavy machinery operators, to help clear the wreckage. Kansas City was choked with people desperately trying to evacuate it, in the face of an anticipated second invasion. Angie stayed home, laboring over her guns, until her lower back was tight and burning from the hours she'd spent hunched over the workbench, her head pounding from staring at copper-alloy wires through her magnifiers. She tucked the gun that was closest to being ready into a hip pocket of her coveralls and set off for the bar.

On her way, she passed the corpses of a pair of enemy soldiers, slumped against the carcass of a giant mole. All three were riddled with holes from magnet guns. Already, radio commentators were declaring that this attack must be the work of one of the other nations with access to a tunnel, Argentina or Mongolia, or of a neighboring power, Brazil or China. The figures Angie saw, however, were not the residents of any nation she knew. They were small, no more than three feet tall. Their skin was pale to the point of translucence, their long hair colorless. Behind ruined goggles, their eyes were large, maybe twice the size of Angie's. Their noses were both broad and long. Their equipment was like nothing she'd encountered, arrangements of metal and glass tubes that resembled strange musical instruments more than weaponry.

At Hunter's, over pitchers of watery beer and plates of burgers and fries, she described what she'd seen to her co-workers, gathered there for the same reason as she. With the exception of Fiddler, who insisted what she'd seen proved the invaders came from Argentina, none of the others knew what to make of the undersized soldiers and their odd armament. It seemed likely the invaders had come from somewhere on the other end of the tunnel, which already had proven itself host to an abundance of new flora and fauna. This was the first anyone had encountered intelligent life, other humans, but so little of the interior had been explored, it was well within the range of possibility for there to be a dozen civilizations, more, scattered

across its surface. There had been talk of mounting an expedition—a series of expeditions—to undertake a detailed survey and mapping of the interior, possibly under the aegis of the National Geographic Society. The Incursion leant urgency to such an enterprise, even as it forestalled it until further military action could be completed. And that was provided the mole men, as the radio was calling them, didn't return for a second, larger attack.

Possibly the four—or was it five?—tall glasses of beer she'd downed loosened Angie's tongue, dampened the discretion she otherwise would have exercised. Possibly the amount of time she'd spent laboring over the guns demanded recognition. Either way, she reached into her hip pocket, withdrew the gun from it, and laid it on the table. "If those fellows pay us another call," she said into the silence that descended over her coworkers, "I wouldn't worry. This baby took care of seven of them with one shot."

Of course no one believed her. She picked up the gun, stood, and walked ten paces to the other side of the bar. She dialed the power to the lowest level, aimed at the empty pitchers of beer crowded in the center of her table, and fired. A bolt of lightning snapped from the tip of the gun to the nearest pitcher, then leapt among them. White light blazed around the glass containers. When it subsided, they had been reduced to dust. One eyebrow cocked, the nozzle of the gun pointed up (*and no smell of burnt copper!*), Angie surveyed her companions. "Well?" she said.

In the tumult of exclamations, congratulations, and interrogations that ensued—in the vigorous handshakes, the heavy slaps on the back—in the shots of whisky set in front of her—the events of the previous night became confused. The seven smaller mole things shattered her front window, then scrambled inside her house, then cornered her in the garage. The creatures were joined by a single handler, standing at a safe distance and taking flight once they were dust, then a trio of handlers, who had felt the effects of Angie's gun, then an equal number of enemy soldiers, who had shared the animals' fate. It was as if, so dramatic was the effect of her weapon, its use required an equally dramatic scenario (as if seven of the mole creatures hadn't been drama enough). By last call, the seven smaller mole things had grown to seven of their elephantine fellows, each with a full complement of hostile fighters. They had ravaged Angie's neighborhood, reduced her house

to a single wall from behind which she had taken aim at them and disintegrated the lot with a single squeeze of the trigger.

Late the next afternoon, when a knock at her front door had announced a pair of G-Men in matching cheap suits, she still had enough of a hangover not to realize why they were here and what they wanted her for. Until they instructed her to bring the gun—the one she'd discharged in Hunter's the previous night—she assumed the men were there to ferry her to a briefing about the condition of the Lip and the plans for its repair. Given her position as chief mechanic, it was not an unreasonable guess. Once they mentioned the gun, however, she understood that she was headed for a meeting of a different sort.

She wondered if the G-Men would drive her to Kansas City. They did not. Instead, they traveled a couple of miles to a modest municipal park. Its lawns had been taken over by a small town's worth of large canvas tents. Men and women, some in the same underwhelming suits as her escorts, others in the uniforms of the Armed Services, rushed from tent to tent, their arms full of papers, folders, boxes. At the park entrance, a pair of soldiers, magnet rifles in hand, nodded at the badges the G-Men showed them and directed them to park in Lot A. Angie didn't see any signs designating Lot A, but the G-Men pulled in front of the nearest tent and shut off the engine and no one said anything to them about it. One G-Man ahead of her, one behind, she was led past the first tent to an alley between it and the next one. She and her escorts turned down the alley, which ended in the entrance to a third tent. Another pair of soldiers checked the G-Men's IDs and stepped back to allow the three of them inside.

The perimeter of the space was lined with bulletin boards and tables. Maps, charts, graphs, photographs, drawings had been pinned to the bulletin boards, spread across the tables. Groups of women and men stood facing the bulletin boards, leaning over the tables, engaged in intensive discussions of the information before them. In the center of the tent, four of the tables had been pushed together to provide a larger surface. On it, a large map of the entire tunnel had been unrolled. A number of high-ranking Army officers, Colonels and Majors, kept position around the map. When a junior officer or G-Man left one of the surrounding tables and hurried to deliver some piece of information to one of the senior officers, the Colonel or

Major either nodded, or bent over their portion of the map and made a notation on it in pencil. If the message was of particular importance, the senior officer left her or his station to convey it to a cluster of figures standing a little ways beyond the tables and their map. Angie saw two four-star and three three-star generals grouped in tight formation, their backs to their surroundings, their heads close together. She also saw a couple of women in a better class of suit. And Rockefeller.

He was wearing the vita-suit that permitted him to function as if he were not past his ninth decade. It reminded Angie of the bulky fire-resistant suits the Lip's firefighters trained in, with the exception that the surface of Rockefeller's suit was studded with gauges, buttons, and valves. Rumor was, it could absorb a shot from a magnet gun, and looking at its glossy brown surface, like the hide of some large beast, Angie could believe that rumor. The glass helmet was off, allowing her a clear view of the man's hairless head, bare of the wigs he continued to sport in his public appearances. He looked old, but not elderly; further rumors claimed him the beneficiary of technologies not yet shared with the wider (and poorer) public, which Angie, from her interactions with even the modestly well-off, could well-believe.

The G-Men led her directly to Rockefeller and his coterie of officials. Before they were done introducing her, the old man took a step toward her and said, "Is it true? You built a weapon that killed seven of the invaders at once?"

Angie nodded. "Yes, sir, I did."

"Did you bring it?"

She unsnapped her hip pocket and withdrew the gun. Rockefeller held out his right hand. "May I?"

"You may." Angie passed the gun to him. Cradling it in both hands, he peered down at it. "How does it work?"

"It passes a charge from a pair of batteries into a crystal amplifier. The amplifier does something to the electricity. It boosts it, but it changes it, too. Allows it to break the bonds between atoms, I think. A focusing lens directs the energy at the target."

"I see." Rockefeller turned the gun over. "Is this a hobby of yours, inventing death rays?"

"No, sir, it is not," Angie said. "I started off trying to make a better torch for spot-welding. I'm sure you know, I'm chief mechanic on your dirigibles. The portable torches we use for repairs on the blimps tend to burn too hot and too fast. You need thick gloves to hold them, which makes fine work difficult, and they're empty before the job's half done. If you're working on the ground, it's no trouble to fetch another one. If you're wearing a flight pack and hovering several hundred feet up, it can be a bit trickier. I thought if I could come up with an improved torch, it would make my work that much easier.

"In the process, though, things went in unexpected directions."

"Fortunately for you," Rockefeller said. He handed the gun back to her. "How about a demonstration?"

"Of course. Do you have anything in mind?"

"That." The old man pointed at a bulletin board across the tent. "All right. If you'd ask your people to step out of the way…"

"You heard her," Rockefeller called. "Move! Move if you don't want your atoms scattered from here to St. Louis!" As women and men hastened to either side of the tent, he said, "Let's see if this meets my expectations."

"As long as they're modest," Angie said. She dialed the power to the lowest setting.

Rockefeller frowned. "That doesn't sound like someone who destroyed seven monsters with a single shot."

"'Keep your expectations level,' my mother used to say, 'and you won't fall off them.'"

"You're a philosopher, too."

"Hardly." She lifted the gun, aimed it at the bulletin board (on which, she noticed, was hung a map with Kansas City at its center, a series of concentric rings radiating from it, each a different, lighter shade of red), and fired. A sizzling line of light stabbed the map dead center. Blinding white surrounded the bulletin board, and then it was a rain of dust. Angie lowered the gun. "That's on minimum power," she said.

"What does it do on maximum?" Rockefeller said.

"I haven't tested it, yet," Angie said, adding, "But when I used it on the invaders, it was on half-strength."

"Is that the only one?"

"There's another."

"I'll give you two million dollars for them," Rockefeller said. "One million apiece. Plus the plans for them."

Angie did not reply.

"Or would another arrangement suit you better? I hire you as chief of weapons development at one of Standard Technologies' subsidiaries, give you a ridiculous salary and a mansion with a pool?"

"You want the gun to use against the invaders," Angie said. "Obviously. Are you expecting another attack?"

One of the four-star generals opened his mouth; Rockefeller overrode him. "We don't know. Not long after the Lemurians retreated down the tunnel, we sent a squad of gyrocopters after them."

"'Lemurians'?" Angie said.

"It's what we've taken to calling the invaders. One of the Colonels hit on it. Like Atlantis, but in the Pacific."

"Oh."

"As I was saying, we sent a squad of 'copters to pursue the Lemurians. Their instructions were to gather what intelligence they could. We were particularly interested in learning about the enemy forces. Were the attacking troops a probe, sent to test our capabilities and report back to a larger army, or was this the entirety of their numbers, sent in a desperate attempt to land a knock-out punch?"

"What did the 'copters find out?"

"Nothing," Rockefeller said. "None of them returned. Nor have the second or third squadrons we sent. We received a brief message from one of the pilots in the second group, saying that they made it all the way to the other end of the tunnel when something attacked them. All any of us could distinguish after that was the word 'huge.' And the screaming."

"The Lemurians were waiting for you."

"It seems likely. With the heat rays they have, a small force could hold the far end of the tunnel indefinitely."

"Unless someone can give you an even better weapon."

"In a word, yes. We cannot afford to lose our access to the interior. The technology we've retrieved from it these past fifteen years has transformed the nation. To speak personally, it has allowed me to engage in the pursuits of a youthful man at a time when my thoughts should be turning to funeral arrangements. To regain the freedom of the interior, I am prepared to pay a high price." He ended with a significant look at Angie and her gun.

"Oh, the amount you're offering is more than fair," she said. "But

I can't take it from you."

"Why is that?"

"Because the crystals that give the guns their effect came from the interior and, as far as I know, I have the only samples of them. I bought them off one of the dirigible pilots. I was searching for crystals to use in my improved torch. This girl had a shoebox full of all sorts of rocks, said she'd picked them up while she wandered around the stations, waiting for her cargo to be loaded. I chose the ones that looked most promising. There were four—needle-shaped, kind of sparkly through the middle—that I thought might do the job. One of them didn't work. There was a flaw in it, and it shattered when the charge hit it. But the remaining three tested well, so well that one of them is sitting in here," she nodded to the gun, "and the second is in the matching gun. I kept the third in reserve, in case I needed a spare. "Anyway, the point is, once I realized what these crystals might be capable of, I set out trying to locate more of them. I don't have your resources, but I'm pretty well-connected. To shorten the story, my search turned up nothing. Somewhere inside, there must be more of the crystals, but at the moment, mine are all that's available. Which doesn't bode well for any hopes you have for mass-production."

One of the three-star generals said, "Then why are we wasting our time on this?"

"General Morel has a point," Rockefeller said. "Without the material necessary to reproduce your design in sufficient quantities, it's of little use to us. I will—"

"But even if you had the crystals," Angie said, "the strategy you have in mind won't work."

"If you're going to step on someone's tongue," Angie's mother had said, "you'd best be certain they like the taste of it." From the expression on Rockefeller's face, it was evident he did not. Angie hurried on. "Because what you plan to do is send another squad of 'copters into the tunnel, only this time, they're equipped with my guns. You know the Lemurians are going to be waiting for them, but I'm guessing you intend to throw enough 'copters at them that some will make it through. The 'copters will have the guns set at maximum power, in order to kill as many enemy soldiers as they can. (No one's interrupted me, yet, which tells me I'm at least in the vicinity of the truth.) What happens when one of the 'copters shoots the tunnel? From what I understand of combat, which is not that much, shots occasionally miss their target. You've seen what my gun can do on minimum power. What effect do you suppose ten, twenty, fifty shots at maximum power are going to have on the tunnel's structural integrity? You just got done telling me we can't afford to lose our access to the interior. Why would you undertake a mission that would make that more likely?"

"Your argument is not without merit," Rockefeller said. "But do you have a counter-proposal?"

"I do," Angie said, thus initiating the sequence of events that had led her here, in a controlled fall down a hundred-mile opening into the Earth's interior. She had to think on her feet, but there was nothing new in that. "Send one person," she said. "Instead of a gyrocopter, which is already noisy, before the enclosed space makes it louder, use a combination of drop suit and flight pack. The drop suit gets you from one end of the tunnel to the other silently. The Lemurians might spot you, but even if they do, you're a much smaller target, moving faster, and harder to hit. You fall past the tunnel exit, and activate the flight pack. You attack the tunnel guards from behind, using the guns to winnow their numbers to zero. If anything goes wrong, then you've lost a single life, rather than dozens, and a pair of guns that were of limited use, anyway."

To a one, the generals objected, a combined seventeen-stars' worth of opposition. Distilled, their arguments were simple: we don't have anyone ready for such a mission, and it's going to take us too long to train someone when time is of the essence.

To which Angie replied, "I'll do it."

The tests the generals and their underlings arranged to gauge her proficiency with the flight pack weren't much of a challenge. Angie was accustomed to threading her way through a dirigible's superstructure, spot-welding cracks in it as she went. She could hover two hundred feet up in a strong wind while applying an emergency patch. She could jet along the side of a dirigible at full speed, no more than a foot from its skin, and snatch up the torch that one of her crew had forgotten on the vessel's crown. Not to mention, the assortment of contests and games with which she and the crew passed the occasional downtime: obstacle courses in the hangar, barrel races on the runways, skeet-shooting on the wing. The principle difficulty Angie foresaw was keeping her arms and legs in proper position for the length of her plunge through the tunnel. She solved it herself with sets of elbow and knee braces she wired to lock in place when she tapped a button at the top of her drop suit with her chin. That problem addressed, she attended briefings she half-ignored, and continued to tinker with her guns.

The most serious difficulty she faced came the second morning after her proposal was accepted. She had breezed through the first set of evaluations the previous day, and was confident of doing the same in a few minutes. The Army was making use of the wreckage that had yet to be removed from around the Lip, specifically, a set of warehouses listing most of the way to the ground, which they filled with all manner of debris for her to navigate. Rockefeller had sat through the full complement of her tests the day before, and was present again. This time, though, he approached her while she was standing idle, waiting for the next obstacles to be erected. He was wearing the clear helmet that attached to the vita-suit. It lent his voice resonance. Nodding at her, "Good morning, sir," he said, "In all the hubbub and fuss of having your plan approved, and then of having you approved to carry it out, we failed to discuss what you expect out of all this."

"I'm sure you'll be very appreciative—provided I succeed."

"Of course," Rockefeller said. "You won't have to worry about me. You'll have folks lining up to reward you. There's more you're after, though, isn't there?"

"There is," Angie said. "Let's have it."

She had been turning this matter over in her head since the various generals, under Rockefeller's strong persuasion, had agreed to implement her proposal first, before sending another squad of 'copters to their doom. She took a deep breath. "Once the tunnel is secure," she said, "and the Lemurians have been defeated, I want to lead an expedition to map the interior. I mean really and truly plot out what's where. Actually, I figure it'll require a half-dozen teams at minimum to accomplish the job in a timely fashion. I want to be in charge of that. And I want to be made a general, because I imagine I'm going to have to continue dealing with the military, and I don't want to have to keep explaining myself to every captain with an attitude."

"Clear the end of the tunnel, and you'll be a general."

"What about mapping the interior?"

"It would require a significant investment to undertake such an enterprise."

"You'd have to be a Rockefeller," Angie said.

"I'll bet I could convince Roosevelt to go in on it with me—national security and all that."

"As long as I'm in charge."

"Survive this, and I'll see to it."

"I guess I'd better not die, then."

That conversation, with its false bravado, repeats in Angie's memory as the end of the tunnel grows larger and brighter below her. She doesn't know what the upward limit of the Lemurians' beam weapons is, but she's racing toward it. They could have had her in their sights for a while, now, and be waiting for her to come into range. A direct hit from one of their heat rays, and that's it. She'll have more to worry about if they damage the drop suit, fry the pack. Either she veers into the tunnel wall, or she plummets out of the tunnel, falling up, up, up, until she runs out of momentum and the interior's gravity catches her and dashes her to the ground. Her heart, whose

beat increased only slightly when she leapt off the gyrocopter into the tunnel, races. Will she see the flash of the shot that gets her, or will she suddenly find herself spinning, out of control? She considers activating the flight pack, rejects the idea. There isn't enough fuel in it to return her to the surface; all she'll do is make it that much easier for the Lemurians to discover her. *Breathe*, she tells herself.

The mouth of the tunnel has expanded to immense proportions. She scans its circumference for signs of hostile troops. Scorch marks the size of houses, jagged scars the length of trains, decorate the rock; testimony to the previous attempts on this position. Is there something at her feet? Yes. If her head is twelve o'clock, then at approximately four, she sees the gleam of metal. At six, too. Far enough away from one another to create a crossfire, but close enough to support each other should the need arise. The remainder of the opening appears clear. Better still, she's well within range of the Lemurians' weapons, and no fire has been directed her way, which makes it likely they haven't spotted her.

Hope surges through her like the heat from good whiskey. She lowers her chin to her chest, and pushes the button that releases her arms and legs from their position. She angles herself head-down, folds her arms flat against her sides, brings her legs together, and shoots like an arrow from a bow into the interior.

She's a half-mile clear of the tunnel before she registers anything but bright light and open space. As she slows, she sees the ground below, heavily forested, flat out to the limits of her vision, where it rises to be lost in the distance. It's as if she's arrived at the floor of an immense valley, except that valley consists of the entire surface of the inside of the Earth. The swathe below her, which the US has claimed as its own, sits in perpetual daylight, as do a half-dozen other slices of the interior. The remaining six lie in unending darkness. The reason for this alternating day and night hangs above her, at the very center of the Earth. It shines like the sun, which is what most theories agree it is, a star, but crushed to incredibly small proportions by forces no one has been able to guess. Possibly, it was whoever caged the crushed star in a sphere consisting of six giant strips of a material sufficient to resist the tiny star's heat.

The half-dozen strips are spaced equidistantly; the general assumption is that the cage was intended to rotate, providing the interior periods of light and dark. Whether the sphere stopped spinning, or never worked in the first place, no one can say. Lack of certainty about the interior is one of the defining characteristics of most discussions about it. Fabulous technology has been discovered in ruins a short distance from each of the known tunnels, devices that have altered the course of the twentieth century in more ways than anyone has yet realized. What became of those inventions' creators, however, remains a mystery. One of Angie's crew, Grey, claims that the planet was hollowed to serve as a shelter, the material that was excavated compacted and set into orbit as the Moon. *So what happened to the folks who did all of this?* the other crew members asked him. *That's the question, isn't it?* he said.

There's no time for wild theories: she's slowed almost to a stop, the interior's gravity tightening its hold on her. She turns upside down, in order to be in proper position once she starts to drop back toward the tunnel. From this perspective, the Lemurians she spotted should be at eight and six o'clock. She also should have a better view of them. They are, and she does. There don't appear to be that many of the enemy soldiers, maybe seven or eight at each post; though there could be additional troops waiting in the forest, which surrounds the tunnel at about a quarter-mile's distance. Of more immediate concern to her are the creatures stationed with each group of soldiers. There are two of them, one per position, and they are immense, big as whales. She supposes they could be called moles, but these moles sport claws the size of a car. Elaborate harnesses secure long saddles to their backs.

Angie unsnaps a holster and withdraws one of her guns. She's stopped rising, is beginning to plummet. She presses the button on her left glove, and the flight pack whines to life. She kicks back, angling herself at the Lemurians at the six o'clock post, and the pack speeds her toward them.

This part of the plan has always been simple. Come at the Lemurians from the interior, with the light behind her, and hit them fast. Keep moving, keep them off balance. Especially once the first few of them have been reduced to dust, she figures the rest will panic, even flee, making her job that much easier. Isn't there a saying about no plan surviving contact with the enemy?

The enormous mounts have raised their great blunt heads at the flight pack's high-pitched scream. Both sets of soldiers notice the creatures' reactions, but their first move is to check the tunnel. Angie cuts the pack, which causes the huge moles to swing their heads from left to right, attempting to locate the noise that just disturbed them. The troops continue to survey the tunnel, sweeping it with stubby telescopes, their strange weapons pointed into it.

A couple of hundred yards above her target, several things happen more or less simultaneously. One of the soldiers at the eight o'clock post notices her and swings his weapon in her direction. The heat ray flashes yellow in front of her. She activates the flight pack, which rushes her forward through air superheated by the beam. She gasps, raising her gun at the Lemurians beneath her. Prior to her leap into the tunnel, she set the power on three-quarter strength. As the soldiers below her see their colleague fire in their direction, they look up, and find Angie diving at them. They raise their slender weapons, and she squeezes the trigger.

A lightning bolt worthy of a thunderstorm springs from the gun, cracking the air as it goes. Surrounded by phosphorous-bright light, the five soldiers struck by it shriek and are consumed. The remaining pair of troops have run to the mole creature, which is that much larger this close. At the combined screech of the flight pack and clap of her gun firing, it throws its head back, pushes up on its forelegs. Its snout, Angie sees, ends in a dozen fleshy tentacles, each the diameter of a car tire and the length of a city bus. The protuberances coil and uncoil, wrapping around one another, snaking out into the air and whipping back. A second shot from the other soldiers burns at her. She executes a backflip to avoid it. The ray catches the tip of one of the nearer mole thing's tentacles. The animal emits a piercing shriek as it lurches backward, throwing the soldiers who have clambered onto its saddle into one another. Angie comes out of her flip early, skimming over the ground and aiming at the pair of Lemurians who are attempting to draw a bead on her. Her shot blanches them and half their saddle to dust. The accompanying shout of thunder spurs the mole thing forward, in the direction of the remaining soldiers. Angie drops behind and follows it.

Whether the second post is aiming at her, or at the giant animal bearing down on them, doesn't matter, practically speaking. Their heat rays rake its

hide, its head, severing one of its tentacles. The attack does not deter the mole creature's charge; if anything, the beast gathers speed. Angie pops up from its cover long enough to fire at the head of the other mole creature. She thinks the shot strikes several of its tentacles, but she drops back down before she's sure. The crack her shot produces causes the creature in front of her to pick up its pace even more.

Heat rays blister the air around her; the Lemurians putting everything into stopping the behemoth about to crash into them. Angie falls back, and jets straight up a hundred yards. From this vantage, she watches the mole creature complete its charge into its fellow. At the last moment, the Lemurians, who have kept their mount turned sideways, to allow them better aim with their weapons, attempt to wheel their beast around to meet the other head-on. Already maddened from Angie's shot, which does appear to have disintegrated half of its tentacles, the mole creature refuses its riders' command. Then the other thing smashes into it.

The impact crushes half the soldiers instantly, sends the remainder flying in all directions. Enraged, the giant animals swipe at each other with their great claws, opening twenty-foot wounds in their hides. Blood slaps the ground. So distracted is Angie by the spectacle that she almost fails to notice the Lemurian, miraculously unhurt by his catastrophic fall, point his weapon at her. But notice him she does, and she drops beneath his shot and returns fire before he can shoot again. By the time his screams have faded, the mole creatures have finished their fight. The beast that was carrying its troops appears dead. The other lies panting, and from the rents in its sides, the blood pooled around it, does not appear long for this world. The remaining soldiers don't look in much better condition. One lies with a leg bent at an unnatural angle. Another's left arm and left half of his chest have been crushed. A third sits cross-legged, a long cut to his head spilling blood down his face, which he does not bother to wipe.

Angie lands at a safe distance from them. Keeping her gun pointed in the survivors' general direction, she scans the surrounding forest. It's empty of additional troops. *What was all of this?* she wonders. *A warning? A taunt? A suicide mission?* She imagines she'll have the opportunity to find out, once her mapping mission departs.

There's a high-powered radio in a pouch on her hip. Due to concern about the Lemurians having the ability to monitor such transmissions, she was only to use it if she succeeded. She flips it on, extends the antenna. She presses the button marked TALK.

"This is General Taylor," she says. "Over."

Outside the House, Watching for Crows

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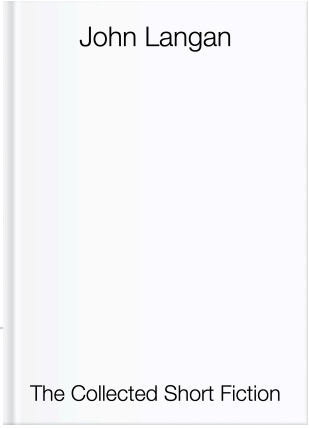

Dear Sam,

I know: who writes a letter, anymore?

I suppose you're used to the mail as a conduit for care packages from your mom and Steve, or Liz and me, but if you're anticipating any written communication from us, you'll check your email, or your Facebook account, or even Twitter. I thought about sending this as an email. Actually, I did more than think about it. In the "Drafts" folder on my laptop, there are a couple of paragraphs I obsessed over for several hours after our last conversation, then for several more hours the following night, before I decided it would be better to sit down at my desk with a pad of legal paper, an extra-fine Precise V5 (black), and compose a letter to you. (For reasons you'll understand later, the social media options never were.) This is the way I plan out a case, spread all my notes around me and arrange the facts they relate into a coherent structure.

I don't have any notes, now. What I have is your question, "What's the weirdest thing that's ever happened to you—I mean, the *weirdest*?" which (I admit) I speculated might have been prompted by your experimentation with substances I probably don't want to know about. Yet the answer that instantly occurred to me seems to come directly from such an experience. To be honest, I'm almost embarrassed to tell it to you. For one thing, it's so extravagant you may suspect I've finally started the novel I've been threatening. For another, it doesn't show me in the best light, and while I know you've been aware of my clay feet for a long time, I'm reluctant to call attention to them. At the same time, there's a part of me that's been desperate to relate this story to someone since it happened. I thought I had long since learned to control that urge, to suppress it, but your question threw open the doors and let it loose. By writing this, I suppose, I'm giving

in to my need to confess; although I’m doing so in such fashion that I still have the option to delete it once I’m finished.

So: it begins with the answer to your question: at the beginning of the summer between my junior and senior years of high school, I attended a concert by a band called The Subterraneans at The Last Chance, which was a club in what I guess would have been called downtown Poughkeepsie. There weren’t many other people present. Aside from me and the friend I’d met there, maybe two dozen bodies filled the space in front of the stage. At the beginning of the show, I had positioned myself toward the rear of the open area. About halfway through the band’s set, in the midst of a keyboard solo that went on and on, I felt a breeze tickle the back of my neck. I glanced behind me, and saw the section of the club there, under the balcony, had changed. It was completely dark, except for a strip in the middle opening into a narrow alley right through what had been the club’s bar. I was not hallucinating—at least, I hadn’t ingested anything that would have allowed this to be a possibility. The breeze blew out of the alley against my face, carrying with it the smell of the ocean, brine and baked seaweed. I looked away, but the odor persisted. When I turned around, the alley was still there. I took a step toward it. Around me, the keyboard, sounding like a manic pipe organ, continued its solo. Bright moonlight picked out scraps of paper skittering across the alley’s cobblestones. At the far end of the passage, a group of tall figures stood in silhouette. I advanced another step. I didn’t like the way the moonlight slid over those tall shapes, but this didn’t stop me from continuing in their direction. I was wondering why none of the rest of the audience was noticing this when Jude, the friend I’d met here, shoved past me and walked right up to the verge of the alley, where he stopped—waiting, I realized, for me to join him.

There isn’t a great deal more—though there is something—but what I’ve related is incomplete, devoid of the context that brought me to that moment. If I’m being frank, then I have to admit, I’m not certain how much those details explain the events of that night. But it feels wrong to relate this portion of the narrative without what came before. I need to back up, to an aging manila envelope I’ve kept for twenty-five years, through moves from apartments to rental houses to my own house. It contains an audiocassette tape, a ticket stub, and a Polaroid faded almost beyond visibility. The tape

has been unplayable since it unspooled in my car stereo and became so hopelessly entangled in the deck's mechanisms that I had to snap it in several places to extract it. Although I spent I can't tell you how many hours attempting to repair it, smoothing its creases, gluing its ends together, winding it back onto its wheels, it was too far gone. Nor could I replace it, since it was a copy of a bootleg recording of which, as far as I know, there was only one original. (I'm not even sure about that, since I never saw the tape it was copied from.) And yes, I've searched online for it, and no luck. When it still played, the tape contained fifty-nine minutes of the band I mentioned, The Subterraneans, performing a live show at The Last Chance. The ticket stub is for another concert by the same band at the same place on 21 June 1986.

The Polaroid is not a picture of the band. It's of a group of people I spent Friday and Saturday nights hanging out with during the spring of my junior year of high school. Even with the damage two and half decades have done to it, I can identify everyone in the photo; though my memory supplements details that have deteriorated beyond recognition. Were you to look at it, I imagine you'd see a collection of pale ovals like a talented child's approximation of faces, each one ornamented with a tag screaming "Eighties!" Long hair hair-sprayed into exaggerated pompadours in the case of the guys; short hair spiked and/or dyed purple in the case of the girls. Short leather and denim jackets festooned with buttons displaying the names of bands, the anarchist "A," slogans like "Sticks and stone may break my bones, but whips and chains excite me." Jeans and Doc Martens, or ankle-length skirts and Keds, or leather miniskirts and fishnet stockings with Docs or Keds. Clunky jewelry. It was Punk meets New Wave meets Proto-Goth.

No, I didn't dress like that. However much I may have wanted to, I was far too self-conscious, too much of a conformist, to abandon my Polo shirt, jeans, and Converse, not to mention, my blue-and-yellow varsity jacket, an article of clothing I'd worn in all but the hottest or coldest weather since lettering in spring track my sophomore year. My clothes didn't exactly make me fit in at school—my shirt and jeans were whatever brands were on sale at Marshalls or Kmart—but they didn't make me stand out. They were like a kind of low-grade camouflage. The jacket drew a few startled looks

from the self-identified jocks and their girlfriends; that was all. It might have made me a little less visible as a target for ridicule, which was about as much as I hoped for.

So if I was so obsessed with invisibility, why did I spend my weekend nights in the company of people whose clothes, hair, everything drew all eyes in their direction, right? To start with, there was a girl. Her name was Lorrie Carter. She was my date for the junior prom. When I asked her to go with me, it was as a friend, because she cocked her head to the right, narrowed her eyes, and said, “As boyfriend-girlfriend, or as friends?” and I said, “As friends,” the tone of my voice implying, “Of course.” Lorrie was attractive. I would have been happy to invite her as boyfriend-girlfriend, but I was reasonably sure she was seeing someone who wasn’t a student at Mount Carmel, and I was desperate for a prom date. To be honest, even had I not suspected she was dating, I would have given the same answer. Unlike you, by the ripe old age of sixteen, I had yet to have a girlfriend. I hadn’t even kissed a girl. During the games of spin-the-bottle I’d taken part in at the couple of sweet-sixteens I’d been to, the neck of the bottle never seemed to point exactly at me; instead, the guys to either side of me saw their nights improve. Too much information, I suppose. The point is, as far as girls went, my self-confidence was nil.

But Lorrie agreed to go to the prom with me, and about two weeks before the event, she invited me to join her and some of her friends for Chinese food on a Friday night after I was done with work. (I had a part-time job at a Waldenbooks, which I’m not even sure exist, anymore, in a mall that I know doesn’t exist, anymore.) Your grandparents were only too happy to give their permission. Until I turned sixteen, they strongly discouraged me from dating anyone. Once my birthday passed, however, they began to inquire and even nag about my romantic prospects. They had looked dubious at my description of my prom date as a friend. For me to be meeting her for a meal was more in keeping with their expectations.

If they’d been there for the actual meal, though, any comfort they felt would have evaporated. I met Lorrie and her friends in the main parking lot of Dutchess Community College, whose location I knew but to which I’d been only once, the time I accompanied Uncle Matt to the County Science Fair there. The parking lot is at the foot of the hill on which the campus sits.

I remember being surprised at the lights still shining in the windows of the college buildings, the number of cars in the parking lot at nine forty-five on a Friday night. Lorrie and the quartet of friends with her had already picked up their order of Chinese and were passing the open white containers back and forth, some using the chopsticks the restaurant had provided, others opting for plastic forks. Lorrie had the door to her old Saab open and was perched on the edge of the driver's seat, legs extended, ankles crossed. To her left, a tall guy whose white-blond hair rose above his head in a rooster's comb leaned against the car, while the remaining guy and pair of girls sat in a half-circle on the blacktop in front of Lorrie.

At the sight of me, sporting the ubiquitous varsity jacket over my shirt-and-tie work clothes, a collective tense stiffened the group, until Lorrie's face lit with recognition and she proclaimed, "This is my friend, Michael. He's my *prom date*," and everyone relaxed. One of the girls sitting on the ground held up a carton of food. I took it and the chopsticks Lorrie handed to me. I hadn't seen chopsticks outside Sunday afternoon kung-fu movies on channel 9, but I slid them from their paper wrapper, snapped them apart, and gave it my best try. The container I'd taken was full of large slices of mushroom and green pepper floating in a spicy blue-gray sauce that numbed and stung my tongue at the same time. Mushrooms weren't something your grandmother served on a regular basis, by which I mean ever, and I didn't like the way these ones squirmed in my mouth. I ate enough not to be rude, then exchanged the carton with the sitting guy for one full of fried rice, whose taste I greatly preferred; although I spilled more of it than I ate. I hadn't known to bring anything to drink with me, but no one else had a beverage, either, so I guessed it was okay.

It was a strange night—the hour and a half of it I spent with Lorrie and her friends before I had to speed home to miss my curfew by only a little. I guess it's always a bit awkward when you meet a new group of people, but the few times this had happened to me previously, it hadn't taken long for me to flip through my list of general high-school-related topics and find one that would allow us to pass the time pleasantly if blandly enough. Where do you go to school? How is it? Really? Or, You listening to anything good? Bryan Adams? Yeah, I love the video for his song, "Heat of the Night." (Don't you laugh at Bryan Adams.) These guys, though—it was like talking

with people who spoke, not another language, but a dialect so profoundly removed from your daily speech, you could pick out only every third or fourth word if you were lucky. School? With the exception of Lorrie, everyone there went to a different private school I'd heard of but otherwise knew nothing about: Heartwood Academy, Most Holy Temple, Poughkeepsie Progressive School, George Rogers; although, from their conversation, it wasn't clear how much any of them knew about their individual schools, since their days apparently consisted of skipping class, in-house suspension, and blowing off school altogether. If I tell you how shocked I was to hear people comparing notes on the best way to forge a hall pass, I realize how naïve, how sheltered that will make me sound, but I was both of those things. I might have thought about missing Calculus, but fear of being caught—and punished—by your grandfather kept the thought from becoming action. Parents, though, and any reprisals they might threaten, were of scant concern. Even Lorrie talked with cheerful disregard of calling her mother an uptight bitch for asking her why there were so many absences listed on her last report card.

As for music… I liked to think of my tastes as fairly eclectic, extending from Michael Jackson to Prince to Bruce Springsteen to Madonna (although I wouldn't admit the last one), plus a few bands who were mildly off the beaten track: INXS, U2, Talking Heads. (While I'm sure my examples will seem painfully parochial to someone of your generation, I would make the case that, say, *Bad*, *Sign o' the Times*, *Tunnel of Love*, and *True Blue* cover a much larger musical terrain than you might grant them credit for.) In fact, when talk turned from school to records, I felt a brief flare of hope that I would be able to break what had become a long and uncomfortable silence. However, except for a nod when the guy with the rooster-comb—whose name was Jude—asked if I knew INXS's *Listen Like Thieves*, I remained outside the discussion. Bauhaus, Love and Rockets, Dead Can Dance, Pixies, Throwing Muses: I had never heard of these bands, let alone anything they'd done. Other bands—Depeche Mode, The Psychedelic Furs, Siouxsie and the Banshees—I recognized as names attached to songs I'd listened to on the radio, none of which had impressed me one way or the other. You know how it is when you're talking to your friends about a shared passion. You speak in shorthand. While perfectly intelligible to you,

it leaves anyone unfamiliar with it with the sensation of listening to a radio broadcast clouded by static, so that only the occasional phrase or sentence comes clear. It's the type of thing for which lawyers are constantly criticized, speaking "legalese," but really, there are a multitude of examples.

Two events redeemed the night. When a check of my watch showed it was time to go, Lorrie walked me to my car. After I thanked her for inviting me, I'd had a good time, her friends were cool, she said, "I've been thinking about the prom."

At those words, my stomach lurched. She was about to announce her decision not to go with me, after all. Tonight had been a test and I'd flunked it with flying colors. I wondered if I'd be able to find another date in time.

Lorrie said, "Remember when I asked you if we were going as boyfriend-girlfriend, or as friends, and you said, 'Friends?'"

I nodded. "Sure." She was going with her boyfriend. Was it Jude? The other guy?

"I think we should go as boyfriend-girlfriend."

For a moment, I literally did not understand what I had heard. Then, when the meaning caught up with the words that had delivered it, I said, "Really?" I like to think my voice wasn't too high-pitched and incredulous.

"Uh huh," Lorrie said, and stepped forward, raised up on her tip-toes, and kissed me on the lips. It was brief, almost chaste. Before I could respond, she said, "See you Monday," and was walking away. Fully twenty-five years, a quarter century, have passed since that night in March, and the soft give of Lorrie Carter's lips is as vivid to me as if she had pressed them to mine this minute past.

All right, all right: once again, too much information. The other thing that saved the occasion occurred as I was nodding to everyone, saying my goodbyes. Jude stepped away from his position on Lorrie's car, his right hand held out to me. At first, I thought he was offering to shake my hand, which wasn't something my friends and I did, but when in the DCCC parking lot… until I noticed the black plastic cassette tape in his fingers. "Here," he said as I took it, "if you like *Listen Like Thieves*, you might get this."

“Thanks,” I said, and slipped it into my jacket pocket. There it stayed until the following morning, when I was searching for my car keys. Do you know, I never asked Jude why he gave the tape to me? There were several moments later on when I could have, but the question always seemed to slip my mind until it was too late. And then it was.

The fact I’d been handed the cassette in the first place had vacated my thoughts, pushed out by the memory of my first kiss from my first girlfriend. There have been a lot of happy events in my life since then: your birth, my wedding to Liz, completing law school, opening my own practice—those and plenty more, but I’m not sure any of them made me happy in exactly the same way I was after that kiss. My first impulse is to compare the emotion I experienced during the drive home that night to what I felt as a child at some unexpected pleasure, say, your grandfather surprising Uncle Matt and me with a trip to the Roosevelt to see *Star Wars.* But that’s not it. The smell of Lorrie’s perfume, floral (lilacs, I think) without being overpowering; the faint taste of the mushroom and pepper dish she left on my lips; the momentary press of her body against mine—obviously, none of this is anything like sitting in a darkened theater as spaceships arc across a starscape, exchanging dashes of red and green fire. What is the same is the quality of the happiness which infused each occasion, a certain… the word that occurs to me is “purity,” which is accurate enough for me to set it down; although further reflection suggests “uncomplicated” wouldn’t be a bad choice, either.

By the trip to work the next day, my emotion had moderated, though the early sunlight that made me squint and flip down the visor seemed more intense, more charged with raw, unprocessed beauty, than I’d noticed before. I’d brought the tape with me. There was writing on it, a single word I couldn’t decipher beyond the extravagant “S” from which it unspooled. The word was repeated on the other side, no more legibly. I slotted the cassette into the tape deck, adjusted the volume, and waited.

Considering how important the tape was to become to me, you’d think my first listen to it would have been an experience to rival Lorrie’s kiss. It wasn’t. The quality of the recoding wasn’t particularly good. A low-level hiss underlay a fuzzy collection of longish songs built around an electric guitar whose heavy reverb kept getting in its own way, keyboards whose

pipe organ tones clashed with the guitar, and a singer whose nasal whine frequently disappeared into the competing noise. Neither bass nor drums were especially clear, and what was audible through the din sounded basic, uninspired. Had I been told this was a garage band playing in an actual garage, I would have accepted the description without question. I left the tape on for the twenty minutes or so of the drive to the mall, not so much because I thought the music would improve—hope springs eternal, yes, but there are some albums, just as there are some books, movies, TV shows, that you know early on will not change. They may become more of what they already are, speed further and faster down the road they're on, but they aren't going to veer off it. I was more curious to see if I could deduce what had prompted Jude to pass this tape to me. Yes, he'd mentioned INXS, but this was nothing like *Listen Like Thieves*. That record was crisp, clear, the band's assorted instruments working with one another and Michael Hutchence's voice to construct each song. At least on a first listen-through—which I completed during the ride home from work that night and the drive back the following morning—I couldn't hear any obvious connections. I wondered if the cassette was meant as a corrective to the more popular album, an example of the kind of music I should be listening to. I entertained the possibility it was some kind of joke; although if this were the case, it seemed unnecessarily obscure. Unless that was the point, to demonstrate to me that I was not part of the group. As far as explanations went, it fell pretty firmly under the paranoia column, but such is adolescent psychology.

When I started the tape a second time, on the way home Sunday afternoon, it was because I was no closer to understanding what I was supposed to take away from this music at its end than I had been at its beginning. To anyone in a similar situation, then or now, my counsel would have been, "Don't worry about it," but this was advice I myself was (and am) unable to accept. If someone tells me a work of art's something special, I will stick with said piece of art until I: a) decide the person who recommended it was right, b) decide the person who recommended it was wrong, or c) decide I need more time with it. If something requires more time, I'll take as much of it as I require, to the point of years. After my first listen to Jude's tape, I was pretty close to option b), but enough doubt colored my impression for me to

conclude another listen was in order. It didn't hurt that the guy who'd handed it to me was a friend of my newly minted girlfriend.

However, the most my repeat play accomplished was to leave the cassette in the tape deck, resulting in a third and fourth exposure on the drive into school, the drive from school down Route 9 to work, and the drive home from work. Nothing clicked. There was no magic "Ah-Ha!" moment when understanding dawned on me. But by the time I was back at the beginning of the tape for run-through number five, a vague sense of what was so significant about the music on it had started to suggest itself to me.

That music. Once you accommodated yourself to the clash of the guitar and keyboard, and could concentrate on the melody they were fighting over, you realized the band's songs were basically the kind of music that had filled the airwaves of 1950s radio, the bluegrass-inflected R&B gathering itself into rock n' roll through the ministrations of Buddy Holly, the Big Bopper, and of course Elvis Presley. In an odd way, The Subterraneans—it would be another couple of weeks until I deciphered their name—were doing something comparable to what a band like the Ramones was—only, where the Ramones were trying to refine the rock song down to its simplest, purest state, these guys were trying to widen it, start with those simple chord progressions, basic melodies, and throw open all the doors and windows. Had I known anything about jazz, then, I would have identified the parallel of starting with a straightforward progression of notes, stretching them into new configurations, and returning to the original arrangement. As it was, I just thought they were addicted to long, strange solos. The more used to the music I became, the more of its lyrics I was able to decode; although large patches of every song remained opaque to me. There were references to feeling like death, and to litter on the street, and to puddles of black water, and to walking around at two am. Someone named Jo-Jo lived in an apartment that was a great place to crash at. There were several mentions of standing outside the house, sometimes a church, and the words "in-between" seemed to find their way into every set of lyrics. At least once, the singer proclaimed, "You've got to watch out for the crows."

Looking over what I've written, I realize I've failed almost completely to do justice to the music I listened to constantly, every time I was in the car, and soon when I was in my room—I dug out an old cassette recorder that

had a single earplug for quiet listening which practically took up residence in my left ear. I've made The Subterraneans sound like a concept band, an exercise in performance art, and conveyed nothing of their immediacy, of the immanence in their songs, the overriding impression they gave that there was something they were on the verge of saying, a revelation they were on the cusp of delivering. I went to sleep with their music filling my ear, and their songs followed me into sleep, into dreams where I stood on the streets of a city I did not know while the wind chased paper bags and Styrofoam cups across the pavement.

The following Friday, Lorrie invited me to join her and her friends. If she hadn't, I would have asked to. Of course I wanted to meet her outside of school, where our respective schedules permitted us to see one another in only a few classes, but I was eager to talk to Jude, as well, about the tape whose songs were playing in my head whether I was listening to them or not, which had become the soundtrack of my life—or, I'm not sure if this will make any sense, but it was as if my day's activities had become an extended illustration of the music, a featurelength video for it.

The principle difference between this night and the previous Friday was I spent it sitting beside Lorrie on the hood of her car, my feet resting on the front bumper, hers crossed under her legs, so she had to lean against me to keep from sliding off. I wasn't daring enough to put my arm around her, but I placed my hand on the hood behind her and pretended to support myself with it, when its actual purpose was to allow a maximum portion of me to come into contact with a maximum portion of her as unobtrusively as possible. An hour and half with a pretty girl pressed into me was more than sufficient compensation for the remainder of the night being a virtual repeat of the week before, from another carton of vegetables in a strange-tasting and spicy sauce to further conversation to which my contribution was minimal. In addition, Jude was not in attendance. I asked Lorrie about his absence while she walked me to my car. She shrugged and said, "He's got a lot going on." I wasn't exactly disappointed, especially since the kiss I received at this departure was significantly longer and—more involved, I guess you might say. But when Lorrie suggested I might like to meet with her and her friends the next night, some small measure of what prompted me to say, "Sure, yeah," was the prospect Jude would be present.

He wasn’t, and since the weekend after was the prom, I didn’t see any of Lorrie’s friends. I saw her, and the large house where she and her parents lived, and D’Artagnan, her standard poodle, and her parents, who were younger than mine and glowed with money, and the elaborate royal blue dress she wore. Your grandfather had rented an Oldsmobile to ferry us to the prom, held in the catering hall of the Villa Alighieri, an Italian restaurant. Later, he chauffeured us to an after-prom party being held at someone’s house out in Millbrook, and still later to retrieve us from the smoldering embers of the party and return us home. Lorrie and he hit it off, and the night went as well as these things do. The meal and music were adequate, the company at our table pleasant.

What I remember most about the prom is that The Subterraneans’ music colored it, too. In fact, were it not for my subsequent experiences at The Last Chance, I likely would have identified a moment at the dance as the weirdest thing that ever happened to me. It occurred while the DJ was playing the prom theme (for the record, Madonna’s “Crazy for You”). Lorrie and I were slow dancing, her head resting on my chest. Underneath the homogenized sentimentality of Madonna’s lyrics, The Subterraneans’ singer was declaring it was *always* Halloween, here. The space around the dance floor dimmed, as if the lighting there had been lowered almost completely. Where the tables and chairs had been, tall forms moved from left to right in a slow procession. I had the impression of heads like those of enormous birds, with sharp, curving beaks, and dark robes draped all the way to the floor. Then the light returned, and the figures were gone. What I had seen was weird with a capital W, but it also vanished so quickly I was able to blink a couple of times and put it out of my mind. The girl leaning against me, in her stockinged feet because she’d removed her uncomfortable shoes, swaying in time to the theme, facilitated this. For the remainder of the prom, the vision did not return, nor did it during the after-party events, when I was engaged in more pleasant pursuits. The night concluded with a goodbye kiss on the front step of Lorrie’s parents’ house, after which, your grandfather took me for breakfast at McDonald’s.

One month after the prom, Lorrie broke up with me. It was less traumatic than you might suppose. Although I had continued to join her and her friends at the DCCC parking lot for takeout Chinese on Fridays and

Saturdays, school, sport, and work commitments kept me from seeing any more of her. Not to mention, one of the girls on the track team, a cute sophomore, had told me she thought I resembled the lead singer of the band, ABC, and he was *cute*. While I had never been quickest on the uptake when it came to such things (a fact to which your stepmother will attest), even my limited powers of perception could detect this new girl's interest in me. So when Lorrie called to say, "It isn't working," I found it easier to sigh and agree than I might have otherwise. I was still welcome to hang out with her and her friends, Lorrie said, which I took as a formality but appreciated nonetheless. I said I might. After I hung up the phone, I was sad, and briefly angry, at things not working out between Lorrie and me, but I was also more philosophical, more mature about it than I believe I have been about the end of any subsequent relationship, which is a strange thing to realize.

Lorrie and I remained friendly, although I returned to the college parking lot only once to eat with her and her friends. As luck would have it, Jude was there as well, for the first time since the night he had handed me the tape of The Subterraneans. I wondered if he remembered passing me the cassette, but of course he did. Since I was no longer seated next to Lorrie, it was easier for him and me to lean our heads toward one another and talk. He didn't ask me if I'd listened to the tape. He knew. He said, "Well? What do you think?"

"I think I can't stop listening to that tape," I said. "It doesn't matter if it isn't playing: I'm still hearing it, you know?"

Jude nodded. "Anything… else?"

"What do you mean?"

"Have you seen anything?"

"Have I… ?" But I had, the robed forms moving past the dance floor at the prom.

Jude caught it in my face. "You did," he said. "What? What did you see? The Black Ocean? The City?"

"People," I said. "I think they were people. They were tall—I mean, seven feet plus—and wearing these costumes, bird masks and long robes. At the prom," I added.

“The Watch,” he said. “You saw members of the Goddamned Watch.”

“Is that good?”

“As long as they didn’t see you—they didn’t, did they?”

Did they? “No,” I said.

“Then you’re fine,” he said. “Holy shit. You know you’re the first person I’ve met who actually saw something? Amazing.”

“I don’t understand,” I said. “I’m sorry. I mean, I get that something important has happened—to me—but I don’t know what it is.”

“It’s the music. It thins what’s around you, lets you see beyond it.”

I had read and watched enough science fiction to think I understood what Jude was talking about. “You mean to another dimension?”

“Sure,” he said. “Dimension, plane, iteration, it’s all just a way of saying someplace else. Someplace more essential than all of this.” He waved his hand to take in the cars, the parking lot, the college, us.

“How—who are these guys? The Subterraneans? How did they do this?”

“I don’t know. There are rumors, but they’re pretty ridiculous. A lot of bands have messed around with occult material, usually as an occasion for some depraved sex. Fucking Jimmy Page and his sex magic. This is different. These guys are into some crazy mathematics, stuff that goes all the way back to Pythagoras and his followers. What they tried wasn’t a complete success. Most of the people I’ve handed the tape to played it once and ignored it. A few became obsessed with it. Like I said, though, you’re the first to see anything.”

“Have you?” I said. “You have, haven’t you?”

“Twice. Both times, I saw a city. It was huge, spread out along the shore of an ocean for as far as I could see. The buildings looked Greek, or Roman. A lot of them were in ruins, which made the place seem old, ancient. But there were people walking its streets, so I knew it wasn’t abandoned. The ocean was immense. Its water was black. Its waves were half as tall as some of the buildings.”

“Where is it?” I said. “Do you know what it’s called?”

“No.” He shook his head. “I spoke to a folklorist over at SUNY Huguenot. He’d heard of the city. He said it was called the Black City—also the Spindle. He thought it was another version of Hell. He was the one who told me about the Watch, the guys in the bird masks. Said you did not want to attract their attention.”

“Why not?”

“He didn’t spell it out. I’m guessing a fate worse than death.”

“Oh.”

“They’re coming here, you know.”

For a second, I thought Jude was referring to the Watch, then I understood he meant the band. “Here? Where?”

“They’re playing a show at The Last Chance. Late June, I forget the exact date.”

“Are you going to go?”

“Are you kidding? You have to come, too.”

“Me?”

“Look at the effect a recording of their material had on you. Imagine what hearing it live could do.”

“I don’t know.” To be honest, I was as worried by the prospect of what your grandparents would say as I was any further visions. Depending on their moods, they had a way of making a request to do something new sound as if it were a personal injury to them.

“You cannot be serious,” Jude said. “You’re standing on the verge of…” He threw up his hands.

“Of what?”

“Does it matter?” he said. “Really? Does it? Even if this place is a district in Hell, isn’t that more than you’re ever going to find, here?”

I was religious enough for his example to give me pause, but I understood and sympathized with the underlying sentiment. It was what I responded to in The Subterraneans’ music in the first place, in so much of the music I liked to listen to, the sense that there was more, to what was outside and to what was inside me. “Let me see,” I said.

As it turned out, your grandparents raised no objection to my attending the concert. They ran through the standard questions: Where was it? When was it? Who was I going with? Who was this band? All of which I answered to their satisfaction. Their biggest concern was that I understood I would still have to wake up for church the next morning. I said I did. Having cleared this hurdle, my principle dilemma was whether to invite Adrienne—the girl from the track team, with whom I'd been going out for a couple of weeks. On the one hand, I wasn't sure what I might be exposing her to. On the other hand, she might be angry at not being invited to a concert with me. Yes, my priorities were not what they should have been. I decided to play the tape for her and let her decide for herself. The expression she made when the first note of the first song burst from my car's speakers told me her decision before the song was done: this was not her kind of music. I could have insisted she listen to the remainder of the cassette, but I was relieved she hadn't liked the band and didn't press the issue. It meant I could attend the show with her consent, and without having to worry about her.

This left Jude and myself to be concerned about. Not only did The Subterraneans' music continue to form the soundtrack to my life, to the extent that whatever was taking place around me seemed to occur less for its own sake and more as an illustration, however obscure, of the lyrics of the moment, but I experienced a second vision. It occurred while I was lying on my bed, reading for school (*Waiting for Godot*). The earplug was in my right ear, the cassette nearing its mid-point. Beyond the foot of the bed, where my desk was jammed against the wall, the air darkened, wavered, as if a sheet of black water was descending from the ceiling to the floor. I put down my book and sat up. A figure stepped forward, almost through the water. It was one of the Watch. This close, it was enormous, nearer eight feet than seven, wider than my narrow bed. The beak on the bird mask shone sharp as a scimitar; the glass eyes were black and empty. The mask left uncovered the figure's mouth and jaw, white as fungus. Its body was hidden by a heavy cape covered with overlapping metal feathers, or maybe they were scales. A long moment passed, during which my heart did not beat, before the figure and its watery aperture faded from view. Once I could see my desk again, my heart began hammering so hard I was

afraid I was going to vomit. Jude's words, "As long as they didn't see you," sounded in my ears, temporarily drowning out The Subterraneans. What if the Watch saw you? What if one of its members stood at the foot of your bed and leveled the glass eyes of its mask at you? What did that mean?

Nothing good, obviously, something Jude confirmed when I called him. I asked him what the SUNY professor had said about the Watch. Not much, it seemed. According to him, the Watch dealt with invaders to the City. Don't worry, Jude said, I was probably fine. I said I didn't feel fine. "They're trying to scare you," he said.

"Well, they succeeded," I said. "I'm thinking maybe we should give the show a miss."

"Are you kidding?" he said. "We have to go."

"Did you not just hear the story I told you?"

"What do you think is going to happen if you stay home?" Jude said. "Do you think everything's going to go back to normal? You are inside the music now. We both are."

"And what do you think is going to happen if we go?" I said. "If the music has us, then how will going to its source help us?"

"Listening to the tape started something," Jude said. "It isn't complete. That's why we're catching glimpses of the other place, instead of seeing it whole. If we're in the presence of the actual music, it might finish the process."

As far as logic went, Jude's argument left a lot to be desired. But so did the entire situation. In the end, I decided to attend the concert, after all.

It may have occurred to you to wonder why I didn't share any of this with my parents. As your mom and Steve, Liz and I have done with you, throughout my childhood and adolescence, your grandparents routinely assured me that I could always come to them, there was nothing I couldn't tell them, no matter how bad. I think they meant it, too. The times I had taken them up on their advice, though, had gone less than swimmingly. When I struggled with math or science, your grandfather, who was something of a math prodigy, couldn't understand how what was in front of me wasn't perfectly clear, and had trouble finding the words to explain it to

me. When I brought home a failing grade, my protests that I had tried my best were dismissed, because if I had tried my best, then I wouldn't have failed. When I complained of being teased by other kids in school, my parents asked me why I was letting it bother me. From the distance of years—not to mention, the perspective I gained raising you and your little brother—I understand and appreciate that they were doing the best they could, as do most parents. At the time, however, it meant there was no serious chance of me approaching them about what was happening to me. What would I have said? I couldn't stop listening to this tape? I was seeing tall men dressed as birds?

So after I signed out at work on Saturday, 21 June, I drove up Route 9 to Poughkeepsie and The Last Chance. The moon hung full and yellow in a violet sky. I knew the club from the concert calendar the DJs at the local rock station read off twice a day. It had achieved notoriety as the place The Police had played on one of their early US tours—it may have been the first—to an audience of half a dozen people. (There was a snowstorm that night, or so the story goes.) I hadn't been to it, but this was because the bands and singers I wanted to see were playing the Knickerbocker Arena in Albany, or Madison Square Garden to the south. The club reminded me of my high school auditorium, a long, rectangular space overhung by a balcony for about half its length, with a curtained stage at the far end. There was a bar along the back wall, but the fluorescent green band around my wrist restricted me to overpriced Cokes. Underneath where the balcony ended, the floor dropped six inches. A few tables and chairs were positioned around this abbreviated ledge. By the time I arrived, they were occupied by couples in various states of fascination with one another. Maybe fifteen feet in front of the bar, the sound board was illuminated by its own set of lights. A skinny guy who didn't look much older than I was stood holding a pair of headphones to his right ear while he slid a lever steadily up a slot in the board. Cigarette smoke clouded the air at the bar, where I stopped for a Coke and to survey the club. I was wearing my work clothes; though I had removed my tie; but I didn't stick out as much as I had feared. What audience there was appeared slightly older, college age, and were dressed in jeans and casual shirts. It was easier than I'd anticipated to find Jude, who sighted me at the bar and came over to join me. He was wearing a torn

Anarchy in the UK T-shirt, camouflage pants, and Doc Martens. His hair stood up like the crest of some tropical bird. I had missed the opening act, he said, but that was no loss. Some guy with long hair whose guitar strings kept breaking; already, Jude had forgotten his name. He guessed the band would be on in another forty-five minutes, maybe an hour.

We passed what was in fact an hour and a half making small talk. Much of it concerned Lorrie and the other people I'd hung out with in the college parking lot. It was gossip, really. Apparently, Lorrie was seeing a guy who'd been a senior at our school. I recognized his name. He'd been in the drama club. I didn't know him, but Jude considered him an asshole. "She should've stuck with you," he said. I thanked him, but told him the decision to break up had been mutual. This was a surprise to him. Yes, I said, I was seeing someone new, too, so really, everything had worked out all right. Despite the music playing in my head, everything seemed normal, mundane. We were a couple of friends out to listen to some live music, discussing our mutual friends. The weirdness that had enveloped me for so many weeks seemed far away, dream-like.

The appearance of The Subterraneans, themselves, bolstered my sense of the ordinary. There were four of them, drummer, keyboardist, guitarist, and lead singer, who strapped on an acoustic guitar which spent the part of the show I saw hanging at his side like a prop. The four of them wore black jeans and plain black T-shirts. Their hair was long, but not so much they couldn't have worked most day jobs. The curtain parted, and they emerged from backstage nonchalantly, picking their way through the cables on the stage to their respective instruments. Without introduction, they started into their first song.

The cassette had given a fair impression of the band's sound. What it had not conveyed was the intense focus with which they performed. In my car, on my bed, listening to the guitar and keyboard clashing with one another, I had imagined a group whose members were struggling for control of whatever they were playing, and I would have predicted a certain amount of tension, if not outright animosity, amongst them. (Think Oasis.) Everything The Subterraneans did, however, was deliberate and smooth, intentional. The antagonism between the pipe-organ keyboard and the surf-rock guitar, the way the singer's voice overrode and was overridden by them, the

drums' steady, almost monotonous beat, all were precisely as they were supposed to be. The band finished their first song, and, before the audience had started applauding, slid into the next one. This was the way they acted, as if the club were empty and they were performing for themselves. Maybe they were annoyed at the low turnout for their show; though I had the impression that had the place been filled, they would have behaved in the same manner.

When the band took the stage, my internal soundtrack was about two-thirds of the way through their tape. By the opening notes of the second song, however, my interior music had synchronized with the concert. The sensation was strange, as if I were the margin where two versions of the same song by the same band converged. I kept to the rear of the space in front of the stage. Jude stationed himself at the stage's foot. In such a confined area, the sound was overwhelming, deafening. As The Subterraneans progressed through their set list, the stage lights went from white to a deep blue that had the effect of rendering everything on stage fuzzy at the edges, as if it had slipped out of focus. At the same time, I seemed to hear the music in a way I previously hadn't. The keyboard and guitar weren't fighting; instead, the keyboard's chords were creating a vast space off whose walls the guitar's notes echoed. The drum buttressed the enormous structure, while the singer was the point around which the great architecture arranged itself. A feeling of the sacred—sublime, terrifying—swept through me.

This was the moment the breeze tickled the hairs on my neck, and I turned to witness the alleyway that had replaced the bar. It seems incredible to me that I should have walked toward such a thing, but I couldn't come up with any other response to it. As my feet crossed the floor, I noted the tall forms gathered at the far end of the passage: members of the Watch, there to meet any trespass. Air moved over my face, filling my nostrils with the damp smell of the sea. My body felt curiously light.

Then Jude shouldered past me and strode to the edge of the worn cobblestones. There, he stopped and glanced over his shoulder to see if I was coming. I wanted to, but it was as if his contact with me had robbed me of my ability to move. Not to mention, the Watch had shifted into the alley proper, and there was something about the way they moved, a kind of liquid

quality, as if they were ink rather than flesh, that filled my stomach with dread. I hesitated. Jude did not. He turned to the passage and crossed its threshold. I took one step, two, closer. The keyboard's solo rang off the alley's walls. Jude must have seen the black figures drawing nearer, but he did not alter his pace. The Watch allowed him to reach the halfway point of the alley—it may have been a border they had to observe—before they took him. One second, they were ten, fifteen yards from Jude; the next, they encircled him. It was like watching a group of snakes, of eels, slither around their prey. Jude looked from side to side, his eyes wide, his mouth moving. I couldn't hear what he was saying, nor could I read his lips. The guitar echoed up the alleyway. The members of the Watch raised their cloaks; although it looked more as if their cloaks raised themselves. Their masks rippled, the beaks lengthening, the eyes melting into them. Jude lifted his hand, begging for more time, perhaps, asking them to hear whatever else it was he had to say. The Watch fell on him. His hand kept its position amidst the black swirling around the rest of him. I could swear I heard high, hysterical laughter, worse, it was Jude's. I ran for the alley, but it was already gone.

Instead, I collided with one of the bouncers, who was first annoyed with my clumsiness, then panicked by my shouting about what had happened to my friend. Drugs, I'm sure he thought. He ejected me from the club, and told me to get lost before he called the cops. I did, because I couldn't think of what else to do. I'm not sure how I made the drive home. The following morning, after rising for church with my family, I claimed a bad stomach and spent the day in bed. I was exhausted, but I couldn't fall asleep for any length of time. The image of those tall figures lifting their cloaks, their masks flowing into blades like scythes, would not leave me. When I did sleep, I dreamed of crows, hunched around some poor, pale thing, their beaks poised to strike. I was horrified, by what I'd seen and was certain had happened to Jude, and by the prospect of his parents, or worse, the police, showing up at the front door and asking me what I knew about his disappearance. Alongside my horror, guilt gnawed at me. I wasn't responsible for Jude's fate, not directly, but I hadn't done anything to stop it, had I? Probably a lawyer could argue the case for my innocence, but I knew better. I was complicit in what had befallen my friend.

Secretly, I wanted the cops to ring the doorbell. I wanted to confess my role in the events at The Last Chance and be punished. For all my disagreements with the Church over the years, I have always granted it the power of the sacrament of Confession, and the penance that accompanies the rite. It's what the law provides, or can provide, on the secular side of things. No police appeared, however. If Jude's parents knew he'd intended to meet me at the club, they chose not to follow up on it. I actually went to Confession the next Saturday, but after listening to an abbreviated version of what I've written here, the priest gave me a prolonged lecture on the perils of drug use. Had I attempted the same thing with your grandparents, the result would have been approximately the same.

I considered trying to find my way back to that alley; though I'm not sure what I thought I would find. Jude's remains? Evidence he was still alive, held captive in some alien prison? Whatever I hoped for, the other world was closed off to me. In the days after the concert, I realized that The Subterraneans' music was no longer playing its endless loop in my mind. When I listened to the cassette, the songs refused to stay in my memory. In the weeks to come, as the summer unfolded, I continued to play the tape, hoping the air in front of me would waver, and I would once again see the alleyway opening in front of me. It appeared Jude had been right, though. Whatever had been started by the recording of the band's music had been completed by its live performance. Eventually, the week before my senior year was to begin, the cassette unspooled in my car's tape deck, and was so badly damaged as to be unplayable, its songs lost to me.

For years afterward, every time I was in a record store, I kept my eyes open for a copy of The Subterraneans' tape. At the same time, I was on the lookout for information on the band, itself, who its members were, where they were located. I had no luck with either search. Last year, I spent a couple of days researching the band and its music online, but found little of any use.

As for Jude: at the start of senior year, I joined Lorrie for lunch in the senior lounge. We exchanged pleasantries about our respective summers, the classes we would be taking. I turned the conversation to Jude. How was he doing? I asked. Oh, she said, no one had seen him around for a while. Supposedly, he'd left for Boston, which he'd been talking about doing for

years. Boston, I said. Yeah, she said. He wasn't very happy here. He had a lot of stuff going on at home. Well, I said, wherever he was, I hoped he was happier. "I doubt it," Lorrie said. "Some people just aren't, you know?"

I said I did.

As I told you at the outset, I've never shared this story with anyone, not your mother, not Liz. Maybe I shouldn't have with you. If it's easier—if I send this letter to you—you can trash it, pretend I answered your question in some other, innocuous way. That might be better. I'm not sure what more there is to say about any of it. That is, except for the questions I still can't answer.

Love,
Dad

Anchor

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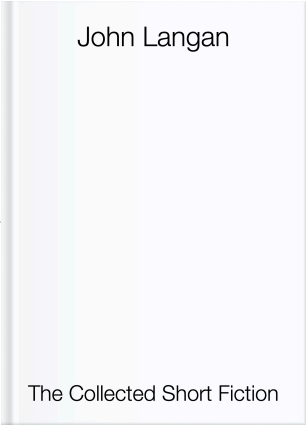

I

> Fire and ruin march on heaven, Surtur
> Brandishes his sword, Loki and his awful
> Brood come for revenge. Who stands with me
> now
> Stands in my doom.
> —James Ogin “Odin Foresees Ragnarok”

For the rest of what will be a long, long life, every October Will Ogin will dream of this night. It will be one of those dreams so vivid as to be indistinguishable from waking; for all intents and purposes, he’ll tell Manda, his wife, when he reveals it to her, he might as well be back at the far end of the driveway to his parents’ house, standing beside his father. Although the calendar welcomed autumn a couple of weeks earlier, the trees are still holding onto a few of their leaves; the air is unusually warm. It is nighttime. His father has switched on the green lamppost beside the mailbox, the one they refer to as Mr. Tumnus’s Lamp. Its yellow light concentrates around its top in a sphere, as if the surrounding darkness is a physical medium against which it must push. To Will’s twelve-year-old eyes, the night seems heavier, somehow, thicker, and not only because he is awake far later than he’s ever been up with his dad, sleep-over late. If he cranes his head back, he can see stars overhead without having to squint too much against the lamppost’s glow. Tonight, his father told him, is the second night of the new moon, which no doubt contributes to the stars’ brightness, but he can’t shake the impression that the sky looks different, the figures whose outlines the stars are supposed to mark gone, replaced by other, unfamiliar arrangements. He pointed this out to Dad, who raised his eyes to the heavens, then lowered them without comment.

The two of them haven’t been at the end of the driveway for that long, but already, Will’s arms are tired from holding the Chinese spear, the *qiang*, out

in a forward guard. This isn't the waxwood version of the weapon with which he's trained at his father's studio in Wiltwyck; it's the real thing, nine feet of polished hardwood capped with a sharpened blade. He noticed it leaning against the house, beside the front steps, as Dad led them outside. His father carried it as they walked down and up the driveway, but once they reached the road, he held it out to Will, who said, "Really?" even as he took it. (He *never* got to handle the actual weapons, not like this.)

"Really," Dad said, unsheathing the long, curved sword, the *do*, he'd slid into the belt of his robe before they exited the house. Like the *qiang*, the *do* was serious business, its edge razor-keen, brought out only for cutting competitions at the big tournaments. His father shucked off his bathrobe. He was wearing his usual nighttime attire of old karate pants and worn t-shirt. He took the sword in both hands, squared his stance, and let the end of the blade dip into a middle guard, so that it was pointing towards the woods across the road. Will followed his lead, and leveled the spear in the same direction.

He had no idea, could not begin to guess what the two of them were doing there. As a rule, his dad was not prone to much in the way of erratic or unpredictable behavior, his limit being the occasional, spontaneous trip to Boice's in Wiltwyck for a hot fudge sundae or milkshake. He had never roused Will from his bed in the middle of the night. It had been Will, sick or pursued by nightmares, who had hauled him out of his slumber. Sitting up in bed a short time ago, blinking sleep from his eyes, Will asked what was wrong, his voice croaking. In reply, his father told him to find his sneakers, they needed to go outside. More asleep than awake, he did as instructed, clomping downstairs to find Dad at the front door, the *do* in its ornate sheath in his right hand. The sight of the sword—of that sword, in particular—jolted Will fully awake. His dad pushed the *do* through his belt, opened the door, and stepped out into the dark. Especially once he saw the spear, Will assumed there was some kind of threat in the yard, an animal, he guessed, though one of the perverts from the boarding house at the other end of their street was also a possibility. He wasn't overly concerned which it was, too excited at being included in the defense of the house.

The longer they've stood with weapons ready, however, the more mysterious their purpose has become. By now, surely an animal would have

revealed itself, or fled, likewise, a person. Will feels his father's concentration weighting the space around him, lending the air the same density that fills it in the run up to a thunderstorm. It's not an entirely unfamiliar sensation, but he associates it in general with the studio, when his dad is training in a new form, and in particular during the weeks immediately before his most recent black belt test, the one for third degree. Yet even the longest of those forms didn't last much beyond two minutes, and anyway, there was movement involved. Nor did his father mind if Will interrupted him as he was practicing his *hyung* ("I do Tang Soo Do for you and your mother," his mantra, "the art is for you, not the other way around"). He's less certain how his dad would respond to a break in his focus now.

When he hears the sounds coming from across the street, somewhere deep within the trees that run down the hillside there to the country road, Will is momentarily thrilled, to the point of happiness. Beside him, Dad lets out the briefest sigh, and Will realizes that his father is relieved, that he, too, has had his fill of waiting. A sense of connection, of love so fierce it causes his hands to tremble, the end of the *qiang* to quiver, sweeps him. He readjusts his grip on the spear, readies it for the source of the noise advancing up the hill toward them. Branches rustle and snap. A tree cracks like a rifle shot and rushes to thud on the ground. Another tree groans, as if a great weight is sliding against it. Something grunts, the deep note of a steam engine venting pressure. Bushes hiss as they drag on whatever is pushing through them. The dead leaves and pine needles that carpet the earth make a sound like sizzling as heavy feet shuffle closer. Before it appears between the trunks of a pair of birches, as if framed in a doorway, there is a moment when Will sees the darkness beyond the trees become darker still, occluded by a shape whose outline does not make sense. He glances at his father, whose jaw has tightened. He's on the verge of demanding, "What is this?" when the cause of the clamor passes the birch trees and into view.

It's a bear. Not one of the black bears native to upstate New York, no, this beast is the deep orange of fire overtaking wood. And larger, by several orders of magnitude, than any local species. Its blunt head is the size of the barrel they use for catching rain; the paws it lifts as big as the tires on his mother's Camry. The creature must weigh an actual ton. *A grizzly*, Will

thinks. It’s the only description that fits; though this bear seems beyond the dimensions of even the largest of that breed. Not to mention, an actual grizzly emerging from the woods across the street raises so many questions, he doesn’t know which one to ask first.

When the bear’s paws touch the road, it pauses. Its head cocks to the left, as if it has noticed Will and his dad for the first time, which it may have: Will isn’t sure how much attention bears pay to their surroundings. Its lips peel back from yellow teeth the length of his palm, and the bear bellows, a long, low wave of sound that Will feels all the way down to his bones. It may be the single most frightening thing he has ever heard. He wants to run, would like nothing better than to cast the spear aside and head for home as fast as his legs will carry him, which he suspects would be far faster than they’ve run before. He can’t, though, can’t control any part of his body, from his legs and arms, which won’t move, to his lip, which won’t stop trembling, to his eyes, which are dangerously close to pouring tears down his cheeks. It isn’t only the bear’s roar; it’s the animal’s very presence, which streams at them like heat from a burning building. More than at any point in his life previous to this, Will has the sense of being in a circumstance beyond his ability to handle.

“Will.” His father’s voice reaches him from a long way away. He has the impression his dad has said his name a number of times. He tries to say, “Yes,” but his mouth refuses anything more complex than, “Uh-huh.”

“I want you to drop the end of the spear—not the tip, the end—to the ground. Can you do that for me?”

“Uh huh.” To his surprise, he finds he can. He lowers the butt of the spear to the driveway’s packed dirt surface.

“Good,” his father says. His voice is slightly higher, but otherwise calm. “Now, if our friend over there decides to charge us—which I don’t think he’s going to do, but just in case—I want you to use the ground as a brace for the spear. This way, when he runs up against it, we’ll have the earth helping us. Sound like a plan?”

“Uh huh.” Words spill from him in a question: “Where should I aim the point?”

“Anywhere in his middle should do,” Dad says. “His neck would be super, but his shoulders or chest would be fine, too. After you do that—after he sticks himself—I want you to get out of the way. It’s too far to run back to the house, but you should be able to reach the Smiths’ front door.”

“What are you going to do?”

“I’m going to see if I can’t convince this fellow to head in another direction.”

“*No, Dad.*” Panic of a different kind seizes Will, loosens his hold on the spear.

“Steady,” his father says. Will re-grips the *qiang*, redirects it at the bear, who is watching their exchange as if it understands them. “Good,” his dad says. “Like I said, though, I don’t believe our friend is going to do anything, *because what he’s looking for isn’t here*.”

For an instant, Will has the absurd impression that his father is speaking to the bear. The impression vanishes when the creature advances onto the road. Will digs the butt of the spear into the driveway’s dirt; his dad shifts his hands on the sword’s hilt ever-so-slightly. “Easy,” Dad says, and now Will is certain he’s talking to the enormous animal, which has paused in the middle of the street, less than ten feet from them. “Easy,” he says. The bear’s eyes focus on him. Will aligns the tip of the spear with a point to the right of and slightly below the bear’s head, where he feels pretty sure there’s a major blood vessels, like the carotid or the jugular in humans. This close, the bear’s breath thunders in and out its lungs. Its smell floods his nostrils, a pungent mix of torn vegetation, rotted meat, and urine. If it charges, Will understands, his dad is going to draw its attack, allow him a chance to spear it. “Don’t,” he wants to say. “Don’t worry about me. Move in quick and strike. Do what you’re always telling me to do. Don’t worry about me.” Standing watching his father and bear stare at one another, the lamp at the end of the driveway casting deep shadows over the road, Will is struck by the absolute certainty that he is seeing his father in the last moments of his life. A combination of dread and acute sorrow washes through him, but he keeps the *qiang* trained on the spot on the bear’s neck.

The bear snorts. There’s something almost contemptuous in the gesture. It swings its outsized head to the right, the rest of its mountainous bulk

shifting in the same direction. Slowly, it ambles up the street, towards the dead-end. Dad turns gradually, tracking the bear's progress with the point of his *do*. Will does the same with the spear. After the bear has been swallowed by darkness, they maintain their positions, listening to the tumult of its passage into the woods bordering the end of the road. Will is exhausted, hollowed out by the confrontation. His surroundings swim in and out of focus. The light from Mr. Tumnus's Lamp burns brighter, as if the darkness has receded. Where the beast stood, the space looks different, the air blacker, as if scorched by the creature's presence.

At some point after the night has grown quiet, the only sound the rush of a car speeding along the county road below, Will's father lowers his sword and turns to him. Dad's eyes are sunken, his cheeks drawn, the short hairs of his beard flecked with white. He looks ten years older than he did at the beginning of the last hour. "Come on," his father says, "I think we can go home now."

Will carries the spear back down and up the driveway. Until they're within sight of the cars parked beside the house, Dad walks with the sword unsheathed, although he leaves the point down. This is the time, Will knows, to ask his dad what just happened, but he cannot summon the energy for any action more complex than setting one foot in front of the other and keeping the spear from striking the ground. His father pauses by their SUV to slot the *do* into its scabbard. Without looking at Will, he says, "I don't think we need to tell your mother about this."

It's a ridiculous statement; as his parents like to say, their household runs on honesty. But Will nods anyway. He stares at the parking space to the left of the Saturn, where, until recently, his dad's friend, Carson, parked his truck while he was staying with them. A connection lights his brain; before he knows what he's saying, he says, "This was about Carson, wasn't it?"

Dad's eyebrows raise. It's confirmation enough, but he nods and says, "Yes, it was."

"Are we safe?"

His father is about to say, "Yes," because that's what dads do, they reassure you, tell you everything's going to be okay, regardless of the evidence.

Something he notices in Will's face, some difference, stops the word on his lips. Instead, his dad says, "I'm not sure."

2

The highway is not a symbol, describes

No mythic transition, is blacktop and miles.

Carson Lochyer "Driving East on I-90"

When Will Ogin is eighteen and in his first semester at SUNY Huguenot, his Freshman Composition I teacher will assign the class an autobiographical essay, its topic, "A Time of Change." Its purpose, he'll understand, is to ease the class into writing by allowing them to discuss the transition from high school to college, which, while not the only possible response to the assignment, will be the one the teacher discusses with the class with the clear intent of steering them in that direction. After a brief conversation with his mother, herself a professor in the college's English department, Will will decide to write on a different event. He'll seat himself at his computer with a bottle of Dr. Pepper and spend the next three hours in a state somewhere between memory and reflection, his room, the sounds of the house, faint. By the time he's finished with the essay, he's breathing heavily, covered in sweat, as if he's just completed a lengthy workout. Although his mom has advised him always to sleep on his work, he e-mails the essay to his teacher then and there.

The following morning, Will reads what he wrote the night before over breakfast:

My time of change began when I was eight and a half years old, and continued until I was almost twelve. For those three and a half years, my father's friend, the poet Carson Lochyer, stayed with my parents and me, renting a room that had been the office in which my dad wrote his poems. At the time, I didn't realize that Carson living with us was having such an important effect on me, but do you ever recognize the truly significant times in your life while they're happening?

Carson drove cross-country from Idaho to our house in early April. My father, especially, was concerned about him traveling at this time of year,

due to the possibility of snow storms in the mountains and on the plains. Carson told him he had to come now if he was going to come at all. The trip took him three days, and my father had him call to check in every day. After he hung up the phone each night, Dad would announce, “Well, that’s him through Montana,” and I would look up his day’s route in my mother’s old Rand McNally road atlas.

Although my parents had gone to great lengths to make sure it was all right for my father’s friend to come stay with us, I didn’t really understand why he was leaving his home in the first place. In all the time he shared our house, I never spoke to Carson about it, either. It wasn’t until a couple of years after he left that I finally thought to ask my parents what brought Carson to us. His marriage had failed, they told me, taking the rest of his life with it. He’d lost his job managing a Home Depot. He’d been asked to leave the school where he taught martial arts. He was seriously past due to turn in the manuscript for his next collection of poetry. He needed a change of scenery, a place to regroup. My parents discussed it, and my mother told my father to tell Carson he could live with us until he was back on his feet.

For three and a half years, Carson was part of our household. He found a job at the Huguenot True Value, which took him out most days. Once he returned home, and on the days he wasn’t at the hardware store, he went into his room and wrote. He wrote, and he wrote, and he wrote. Usually, his door was closed, but sometimes he left it open, and I would sneak a look at him on my way to the bathroom or to use the family computer. When I did, I saw him seated in front of his computer, the screen taken up by a page of whatever poem he was working on. He might be reclining in his chair, his chin resting on his right hand. Or he might be bent forward over the keyboard, leaning toward the screen as if he were riding a motorcycle. He liked to listen to music while he wrote, but he wore headphones. During his first six months with us, he was wrapping up *The Broken Circle*. My father loved it, said it was one of the great long poems of the last decade. Carson wasn’t too crazy about it. I guess that was because he’d started it when he was still married to his ex, so there was all kinds of baggage attached to it. Dad went ahead and reviewed it for the *Los Angeles Review of Books*, and it went on to a better reception than Carson had been expecting. He spent the rest of his time with us writing the poems that went into his next book,

Ardor. This was the one that won him the National Book Award, though not until after he'd moved out.

I didn't spend a lot of time with Carson. That was my father, who passed almost every night in conversation with him. Dad tried to get him to come to his karate studio, which Carson did a couple of times, but he said that what Dad was doing wasn't for him. My father's *dojang* was a typical American school, family-friendly, the majority of its students kids, classes split between warm up, traditional curriculum, and an assortment of fun activities. If you were a serious student, you could train with the senior students, the red and black belts, whose sessions focused more on traditional material. The goal was student retention, which, Dad said, meant that he had to be willing to come and go with people. Carson had studied with an instructor in Boise who worked with only adults, and whose goal was to teach his students how to survive life-or-death confrontations. It was what the martial arts were originally about, Carson said. If students weren't happy with what his instructor was teaching them, they knew where the door was. I trained at my father's studio, and if Carson heard me complaining about the night's workout, he was ready with a story about the kind of training he'd had to do, most of it a lot of push-ups and sit-ups. There was a kind of purity to Carson's view of the martial arts, an intensity that came from his focus. He told me that he'd spent six months perfecting his middle punch, day after day working on the same technique. I was impressed by his discipline, but I preferred Dad's approach, which catered to my youthful short attention span. I guess you could say that Carson focused on the martial part of the martial arts, and Dad favored the art part of it.

They were like that in their poetry, too. Carson was a fan of James Dickey and Charles Simic. My father loved Robert Browning and Jorie Graham. Carson's poems were direct, concentrated. Dad's were evasive, diffuse. In Carson's work, what you might call rough men and women came up against a Nature that was even rougher, and sometimes beautiful, as well. In my father's poems, there are an awful lot of academics, who confront creatures borrowed from ancient myths, and who spend a lot of time thinking about what's happening to them. The funny thing is, they loved one another's writing. They always said that was why they had become friends. An editor

who'd published both of them in her journal sent Dad an e-mail telling him he should check out Carson's poems. Dad did, liked what he read, and contacted Carson. "And thus," my mother likes to say, "was born the bromance of the century." They corresponded; they talked on the phone; they roomed together at conferences and festivals. Eventually, they lived under the same roof.

None of this, I realize, answers the question of what role, exactly, Carson played in my time of change. He didn't cause the change; although it began not long after he arrived at our house. My mother was away for a couple of weeks, visiting her mother in Scotland. I had become obsessed with a TV show called *River Monsters*, which was about an English naturalist and angler who traveled the world looking for rivers where people said they'd been attacked by monster fish. The star of the show, Jeremy Wade, would talk to the locals, do research, then go fishing for the monster. Of course, what he caught were never monsters, strictly speaking, but local fish that could have been responsible for the attacks: giant catfish, arapaima, bull sharks, sawfish, tiger fish, and more.

Inspired by the show, I asked my father if I could go fishing, and to my surprise, he said I could. (Maybe he was running out of ways to occupy me with Mom away; I can't remember.) We went to Wal-Mart, where he bought me my first fishing rod, a Zebco spincast that came with a little plastic tackle box. Dad, who was not a fisherman, had watched a couple of YouTube videos on basic lure tying. We set up the rod and drove to a small pond he'd read online was full of fish and good for beginners. Later, he told me he was waiting to see how I would react if and when I hooked anything.

He found out with my second cast. A good sized largemouth bass took my lure, and suddenly, I was in a situation right out of *River Monsters*, fighting to bring in a fish that was fighting hard against me, splashing the water, jumping out of the pond as it tried to throw the hook. My rod bent. The line vibrated. I held on and drew the fish in. Dad was somewhere beside me, murmuring encouragement. As soon as I had the fish close enough to shore, I handed the rod to Dad, kneeled down, and took the fish by the lower lip. He thrashed so hard I almost lost my grip on him. But I didn't, and I guess you might say that the fish never lost his grip on me, either. I knew, as surely as I've known anything, that I had found my life's passion, the same

as my father had when he first read *The Ring and the Book.* On the drive home, I was already planning my next fishing trip—was already planning a lifetime of fishing trips.

I have to admit, right from the start, my parents supported my fishing. They took me to all the local lakes and ponds, rivers and creeks, and to some that weren't all that local, too. If they had friends who fished, they invited them to join us so that their friends could give me pointers on my technique. They found instructional videos for me to watch on YouTube. They subscribed to *Bass Pro* for me. But despite all of this, fishing wasn't something either of my parents truly shared with me. No matter how many spots they drove me to, they weren't interested in picking up a rod and joining me in trying to catch something. Instead, whichever one of them had taken me brought a book, which they would sit reading while I fished. Now that I'm older, I can appreciate how much they did for me just taking me out as much as they did. At the time, though, I wanted more of a connection with them over fishing.

This was where Carson came in. He had grown up fishing in Idaho. In fact, his father had been a professional guide in the Salmon River part of the state, leading parties of businessmen along the river for week-long fishing trips. Carson had accompanied his dad on numerous trips, and he had plenty of stories about his adventures trying to hook fish in all kinds of terrain, in all kinds of conditions. He was full of stories about his father's fishing experiences, too, though a lot of these had to do with the characters his dad had contracted to guide, including at least one group of *Mafioso* who flew in from Seattle. It was Carson who first gave me the idea that I could be a guide, too, and that I could have a good life doing so (which my parents were concerned about; although they denied it). If I returned home having made a big catch, Carson was there to give me his approval, fisherman to fisherman. A "Good job!" from him made me swell with pride, made my head feel as if it was brushing the ceiling. The funny thing was, in all the time he stayed with us, I can't remember him coming to fish with me once. It didn't matter. His praise, his support, did.

Carson left my house with much less warning than I'd had before he arrived. My father was the one who told me Carson was going. It was a Sunday night. I suppose I'd known that Carson would be moving out at

some point. After all, from the start, my parents had said he was going to stay with us until he got back on his feet, which implied a time when he would walk off on his own. I did my best not to show how surprised I was (because I was almost twelve, and concerned with acting mature). Instead, I asked Dad when Carson was planning to go. “Tuesday, I think,” he said. This seemed pretty soon to me. “Where’s he going?” I asked. “To our friend, Gaetan’s, in Gloucester,” he said. This seemed pretty far away, too. “Why does he have to go now?” I asked. “It’s time for Carson to move on,” Dad said.

That was what he did, setting out for Massachusetts while I was at school on Tuesday. I tried talking to him on Monday night, as I was helping him retrieve the last of the stuff he’d stored in our garage and load it into his truck. He was distracted, as though his mind was already on the road east. I kept making conversation, mentioning fishing spots my father had yet to take me to, the species of fish that were supposed to inhabit them, the lures I planned to use. Carson answered in short, vague sentences. There was so much more I wanted to say to him, a lot of it things I didn’t know how to put into words. I’m glad you’ve been here with us. Thank you for supporting my fishing. Please don’t go. I left all of it unsaid, and then he was gone.

My dad and Carson stayed in touch, via e-mail and the occasional phone call. They saw one another at the occasional conference. After almost a year in Gloucester, Carson left for Toronto, where he stayed until this past spring, when Dad said he was on the move again, this time for Iceland. Over the years, I’ve talked to him a couple of times, when he’s called for my father and I’ve answered the phone. There isn’t much to our conversations. He asks me how the fishing’s going, and I tell him. He might offer a suggestion as to lures. Before I pass the phone to my dad, Carson says, “Sounds like you’re doing great. Keep at it. You’ll be running your own guide business in no time.” Absurd as it might sound, those words never fail to make me feel better, to hope—to believe that someday, I’ll be leading men and women into the wilderness to fish. If and when I do, it will be because Carson Lochyer supported me, never stopped encouraging me.

Sometimes, I think it would be nice to have Carson with me when I set out on my first tour. Then I realize, he will be.

3

The blade burns in the grip of the noble

Heart. Take it, and your heart be made known.

James Ogin “Dyrnwyn”

Of course, Will won’t mention the incident with the enormous bear in his essay, in part because his father will not have explained how the creature’s appearance connects to Carson, exactly. In all fairness to his dad, Will will have avoided asking for such an explanation, on the let-sleeping-dogs-(or bears)-lie principle. On top of that, the event will seem too strange to write down and hope to be believed. Nor will Will mention something that happened a couple of days prior to Carson’s decision to leave, but that, with the passage of time, seems to have heralded it. It occurred in the evening, after homework and dinner. He was at the family computer, playing *Hungry Games*. Due to the unusually warm weather, the windows in the computer room were up, admitting a slight breeze, which nudged the curtains. So involved was Will in surviving to the death match portion of the game and then, once there, in defeating the other finalists, that it took a while for him to register the voices outside the windows: his father and Carson, promenading back and forth along the stone path that ran from the front steps to the driveway. As interested in the conversations of adults as any boy his age, Will rose from the computer chair and moved to the couch, which sat below the windows. Lowering his head to give the impression he’d switched places in order to read, he glanced outside.

His dad was wearing a pair of old karate pants and the black t-shirt printed with the *Famous Monsters of Filmland* cover showing Godzilla and Gamera squaring off. Carson was dressed in long, olive shorts and a faded red t-shirt with the Flash’s yellow lightning bolt on it. Dad’s hands were clasped behind his back, which, Will had learned, he did to aid the impression he was taking what you were saying to him seriously. Carson’s hands were a flurry of motion, in front of him, at his sides, back in front of him, weaving through the air as they did when he was speaking about something that mattered to him. Will looked down at his imaginary book. He couldn’t hear much of what his father, who tended to talk softly, was

saying. It was easier to distinguish Carson's words, though not what they were referring to. "Absolutely," he said.

Dad murmured.

"The weather, for one thing. It was like this the last time."

Dad said something that ended in, "—incidence?"

"Not with the dreams," Carson said. "Not together like this."

Dad asked another question.

"A sign."

"Where?" Dad said.

"Somewhere close," Carson said. "I don't think there'd be anything on your property, not yet. But somewhere close."

Will couldn't hear his father's next remark, but the nod he gave toward the driveway suggested he was inviting Carson to walk it. "Yeah, sure, that's a good idea," Carson said, and the two of them set off in that direction.

There was fishing gear in the back of the SUV that Will had been meaning to bring in since yesterday. He tugged on his sneakers and hurried outside. While he opened the hatch and unloaded his tackle box, net, and rods, he kept an eye on his dad and Carson. They were ambling up the driveway, pausing every few yards to peer into the woods on either side of it. Whatever they were searching for amidst the maple, oak, and cedar remained elusive, since they continued toward the road. By the time Will had run his equipment into the house and returned to close the hatch, his father and Carson had covered half the driveway's length. Will leapt, caught the hatch, and heaved it shut. Then he took off after Dad and Carson.

The two of them glanced back at the slap of his sneakers on the dirt. His father half-turned to face him. "Hey, wee man. What's up?"

"Oh, not much," Will said. "Whatcha doing?"

"We are looking for something," Dad said.

"What?"

"We're not exactly sure," Dad said.

"Something…with fire," Carson said.

“Is someone setting fires on our property?” Will said.

“No,” Dad said. “We’re just checking something out. You can help, if you want. Always good to have another pair of eyes.”

“Sure,” Will said. He liked being included in his father’s and Carson’s activities.

“Good,” Dad said.

Together, they climbed the driveway as it rose to the street. Will stared into the ranks of trees, their branches stripped by autumn, but saw no tell-tale flashes of orange. This past week, the days had been hot and dry, dangerous conditions should a spark fall on the leaves matting the ground. His father wasn’t acting all that concerned, but tension poured off Carson like a fever. Will was aware that his dad and Carson had continued the conversation whose fragments he’d overheard, only stopping when he joined them, and whatever its substance had been hung in the air between them.

They reached the end of the driveway a couple of minutes after the sun had lowered behind the ridge on the far side of their little valley. Like cobblestones, clouds formed a path that led down after the hidden sun, whose glow dyed the clouds a deep, purplish pink. Will, his dad, and Carson scanned the trees around them, on the other side of the street. From the placid expression on his father’s face, Will could tell that he considered whatever he and Carson were discussing settled, and in his favor. Dad loved to be right. Once, when Will was younger, he’d run across the expression, “He’d rather be right than President,” in an old comic strip he was reading. After his mom explained what it meant to him, he said, “Like Dad.” Which made her laugh and tell him not to say that to his father. It was true, though, and one of the qualities he least liked in his father.

“There.” Carson pointed across the road—at first, Will thought, to the trees over there, which didn’t make any sense, because they’d looked at them already and not seen anything. His vision adjusted, and he realized that Carson had seen something through the trees, near the top of the ridge opposite them. It was a line of fire, as if someone had poured gasoline along a hundred foot stretch of the hill and touched a match to it. In the evening light, the flames rose and rippled orange. As the three of them watched, the line shifted. Its ends curved, the left lower, the right higher, the left

swinging underneath the line, the right arcing over it, until the ends met in the line's center, turning it into a figure-eight. Almost as quickly as they met, the ends whipped out in their original directions. It was as if, Will thought, they were watching a performance, a group of dancers, each one carrying a torch, executing a series of carefully-choreographed steps. Except there appeared to be no breaks in the line, which you would have expected there to be, if it was composed of separate people. Instead, they seemed to be looking at a solid line of flame, behaving in ways Will had never heard of fire acting.

A handful of trees on the ridge had ignited. Will could pick out additional spots where the ground was burning. The flaming line writhed like a snake. Will was waiting for his father, for Carson, to say something, but neither man did, caught up in the distant spectacle. Finally, he said, "Shouldn't we call 911?"

Dad and Carson started, jostled from whatever thoughts the spectacle had kindled in them. The whine of a local siren, followed close behind by those of neighboring stations, announced that someone had notified the fire department first. The three of them witnessed the line of flame curl into a spiral, which tightened into a circle, which fell apart into a dozen smaller conflagrations that splashed themselves onto trees, lighting them. Dad and Carson took this as their cue to turn around and start back toward the house. Will accompanied them.

Later that night, the odor of charred wood drifted into Will's room, through the windows he'd left open because of the heat.

4

The eyes are difficult.

Carson Lochyer "Taxidermy"

The July after he turns twenty-seven, Will and Manda (then still his girlfriend) will drive to a spacious house outside of Brattleboro, Vermont, for a week's stay. It will be a working vacation. Manda brings books with her so she can study for the New York State bar exam. Will brings his fishing rods, tackle, and notebook so he can explore possible destinations for the fishing guide business he's finally started. The house at which they

stay is a blended living room and kitchen surrounded by eight plain bedrooms and two and a half bathrooms; in the winter, it rents to ski parties. Will has the idea that, in the summer, it might accommodate fishing groups, which he's shared with the house's owner, gaining a modest discount on the charge for the week.

There's a half-stocked bookcase on one side of the living room, its shelves full of thrift-store rescues. Will flips through them, a habit picked up from his parents, who are unable to enter a room with a bookcase without inspecting its contents. The majority of the books are split between mysteries and spy thrillers, Agatha Christie and Sue Grafton rubbing elbows with Robert Ludlum and Len Deighton. In amongst them, Will finds a thick paperback, its red cover faded to burnt orange. On the spine, he reads *Shardik*, and under it, Richard Adams. He recognizes the name from his mother's bookshelves: it's one of the novels she's taught in her young adult literature class, *Watership Down*. She encouraged him to read the book; he started it, but can't remember finishing it. He slides *Shardik* out for a look. From the center of the cover, a bear's head stares at him. The artist has drawn it mounted on a wooden disk like a hunting trophy, but has left the eyes empty, giving the head the appearance of a mask. Though hardly the most realistic illustration he's encountered, something about it makes him pause, consider it before slotting it back between its companions.

Later that same day, though, after an exploratory trip to a local creek and a dinner of Chinese take-out, Will returns for *Shardik*. Manda is on the living room couch, surrounded by law books. He carries the novel to the easy chair across from her, settles into it, and opens the book. Between the drive here and the afternoon's fishing, he's pretty tired, and anticipates nodding off after the first couple of pages, especially in such a comfortable chair.

To his surprise, he doesn't fall asleep. He stays awake until two in the morning, long past Manda's retreat to bed, unable to stop reading Adams's story of Kelderek, hunter in an invented land, and Shardik, the great bear Kelderek takes as a god. The narrative begins with the bear crashing through the trees of a forest on fire, and that image, of a creature prehistorically-large, wreathed in flame, lights his mind's eye for the remainder of the night, and for the next four days, which is how long it takes him to finish the book.

It’s been a while since a work of fiction has affected him this profoundly. During his visits to nearby creeks, part of him remains inside the narrative. Or it remains inside him: he isn’t sure which statement is correct, only that, were Shardik himself to burst out of the sugar maples, his fur smoldering, and plunge steaming into the stream Will is wading, he would not be surprised. Planning this trip, he was worried that he might be bored after he finished his day’s fishing and Manda was still deep in her textbooks, as she had cautioned him she would be. Adams’s novel solves the problem before it arises.

Will does not dream of his and his father’s confrontation with their own enormous bear, almost fifteen years gone by. If asked about this, he might admit it strange, or might shrug it off. A couple of times as he’s reading, that distant night bobs at the surface of his thoughts, but it’s swept away by the novel’s progress.

When he and Manda leave the house, Will takes the book with him, something he has never done before. For the next ten years, the copy of *Shardik* accompanies him whenever he sets off on a fishing trip of any length. He rereads it on airplanes, on trains, and on ferries. He rereads it by the light of campfires, of ancient light bulbs, of assorted flashlights. Over time, the glue binding the book fails, and he resorts to a heavy rubber band to maintain the novel’s integrity. At last, when he’s guiding a group of advertising executives up French Creek in Idaho (not that far from where Carson grew up), the rubber band breaks, sending the pages of the novel swirling off on the breeze that’s been blowing. Will succeeds in retrieving a few of the pages, but the majority of the book is gone, floating on the surface of the creek, above the trout with their empty gold eyes.

5

Here, in the combustion of dry wood, may

The pistoning of creation’s engine be

Glimpsed.

James Ogin “Pyromancy”

February of his thirty-fifth year, Will will be struck by the worst case of the flu he ever has had or will have. It's a direct result of his skipping the year's vaccine, which he did for no good reason that he can recall. He was busy: with the guide business that's gone much better than he'd hoped; with Dana, his and Manda's older daughter, whose kindergarten class encourages active parental participation in its curriculum; with Flora, their younger daughter, who's been putting her big sister's record of the terrible twos to shame. Manda, returned to her law firm in Wiltwyck after a long maternity leave following the complications of Flora's birth, had been preoccupied with a defense for which she was supposed to be junior counsel, but which she was pretty much running, and Will has tried to step in to allow her the extra time she needed for the case. He meant to have himself vaccinated—he always does—but the early report pronounced this year's flu neither particularly contagious nor virulent, especially compared to those of the last couple of years, so if he couldn't find the time for his annual inoculation, he figured he'd probably be fine.

The extent of his error becomes clear the moment the disease overtakes him. He's sitting on the couch in his study, reading a memoir of fly-fishing the Catskills one of his mother's colleagues published a couple of years ago, and that he's been meaning to open ever since a copy arrived in the mail, autographed and with a personal message to him. The room is uncomfortably warm around him. He wonders if Manda, always complaining that he sets the thermostat too low, has adjusted it upward. His head is light, the way it is when he's gone too long between meals and his blood sugar crashes. Bookmarking his page with his index finger, he goes to stand, and the shivering starts. It begins as a trembling that keeps him seated, and swiftly escalates to a shaking that convulses his arms and legs as if he's having a seizure. His teeth rattle together with such force, they blur his vision. He loses his grip on the book, which flops to the floor. The sound catches the notice of Manda, on her way into her study. She alters course and enters his room. "Hon?" she says. "Are you okay?"

"Flu," Will wants to say, because that's what it is, he knows, but all he can pronounce is a stuttered "f."

It's enough for Manda, who says, "Oh God, you're sick, aren't you?" While he's trying to nod, she places her hand on his forehead. "You're

burning up," she says. "Hang on. We'll get you taken care of."

For the next week, Will spends his days and nights on the pull-out bed in his study. Much of the time, he's asleep, which is fine, because when he isn't, he feels terrible. Every muscle in his body aches, as if he's received the mother of all beatings. If he has to stand to go to the bathroom, his arms and legs seem to be wrapped in lead. When he coughs, his chest is full of razor blades, his temples pound. Worst of all is the fever, which quickly soars to the dangerous heights above 104 and dips only a little with the administering of aspirin. After a day and a half of the highest readings she's seen on a thermometer, Manda phones the family doctor. The nurse to whom she speaks gives her a list of instructions, most of which she's following already, and tells her that if Will's temperature persists at this level through the night, she's going to have to take him to the emergency room. At the nurse's recommendation, Manda fills the bathtub with cool water and empties all the ice trays in the freezer into it. Through a combination of jollying and bullying, she raises Will off the pull-out bed, leads him into the bathroom, and undresses him. Standing this near his bare skin, she feels the fever burning in it. She guides Will into the water, cold and clattering with ice cubes, as their two girls watch from the doorway in wide-eyed fascination.

For Will, the ice-bath happens at a distance, as if he's watching it on the TV on the other side of the living room. He sees himself leaning forward so Manda can scoop water from the bath with one of the girls' bath toys and pour it over his head and neck. The spill and splash of the water sounds faint, as if the volume on the TV has been lowered almost to zero. Ice cubes bob against his legs and back; the contact registers as a faint disturbance. He understands that the water in which he's sitting, which his wife continues to tip over his shoulders, his back, is cool, blessedly so, but his understanding makes scant difference to the conflagration raging beneath his skin. Absurdly, he remembers a phrase from a poem his father read to him, years ago, about a man on fire, consumed by a gift he had not asked for, but had earned. Who wrote that, Dad or Carson? Or someone else?

While the bathroom, Manda, have remained at a remove from Will, another vista has opened for him, as if someone has switched on a second TV, this one closer to him. On its screen, he sees the end of a driveway, the portion

of road to which it connects. It's nighttime, the only illumination offered by a green lamppost set back ten feet from the street. Will recognizes Mr. Tumnus's Lamp, the driveway to his parents' house. The trees bare of all but a handful of leaves tell him that it's autumn. At the limit of the lamppost's glow, a pair of figures stand facing the road and the woods across it. One is holding a *do*, a curved Korean sword, in a middle guard. The other has leveled a *qiang*, a Chinese spear, toward the opposite side of the street. Will knows the scene from twenty-three years before, but a number of the details are wrong. His father and he look not as they did then, but as they do now. Dad is thinner, slightly stooped, his beard and hair fully white. Will is wearing the white Joe's Flies t-shirt and grey sweatpants that are his sleeping attire. The woods across from them have changed, the maples and oaks replaced by a thicket like simplified drawings of trees, tall trunks leading up to round crowns of green leaves. From somewhere within the new trees, orange light flickers.

As this scene appears closer to him, its images more distinct, so are its other details more vivid, as if he's drifting into this space. The spear's polished wood is smooth in his palms. His shoulders and upper arms ache from holding the weapon in one position for so long. The night air is warm, threaded with an odor like oranges on the turn. A breeze rustles the weird trees, whose leaves clash together with a metallic sound. His father's breaths are deep, steady. In a low voice, he's reciting a poem he and Will's mom have quoted back and forth to one another for as long as he can remember:

So rested he by the Tumtum tree

And stood awhile in thought.

And, as in uffish thought he stood,

The Jabberwock, with eyes of flame,

Came whiffling through the tulgey wood,

And burbled as it came!

The orange light brightens, tinting the trunks and crowns of the trees. A wave of heat rolls over the road, enveloping Will and his dad. He blinks at the sudden dryness in his eyes. A chorus of creaks and moans issues from the trees. Their leaves crackle and crisp, shriveling brown. Sweat slides

down Will's face, soaks his t-shirt, his sweatpants. The wood of the *qiang* is warm in his hands. Orange light floods the woods across the street, joined now by a rushing sound, as if a great wind is sweeping up the hillside. Will's mouth is tacky, his clothes drenched. He removes his right hand from the spear long enough to drag the back of it across his forehead and eyebrows, to wipe the sweat from his eyes. Inside the orange glow, there's something moving, a patch of darker orange mixed with yellow and red. It brushes against a tree, and the trunk detonates with a *BANG!* that Will feels in his chest. The crowns of the strange trees, full moments ago, are naked, each stripped to an intricate weave of branches, their leaves reduced to a fall of dust. The moving form draws closer, gaining definition with each step. The bark of the weird trees blackens, seems to bubble as if metallic and melting. Each breath burns Will's throat, his lungs. Another tree bursts, almost at the road. Will ducks, jerking the spear up in defense. Pieces of sizzling wood fly past him.

"Steady," his father says. "He's almost here." He's panting with the heat himself.

As if to fulfill his dad's prediction, the shape at the heart of the light steps between a pair of trees onto the road. It's a bear, its massive bulk wrapped in flame. Fire runs up its front and rear legs in long, orange tongues. Fire rages along its sides, its back, in flickering sheets. Fire envelops its blunt head, vents from its eyes, its mouth, its nostrils. Despite the inferno surrounding it, the bear is not consumed, nor does it move with the panic and agony of a creature dying. It raises its snout and considers Will and his dad through fiery eyes.

Somehow, Will manages enough spit to speak. "Dad?"

"Uh huh?"

"What the fuck is this?"

"Language," his father says.

"Seriously?"

"Seriously."

"Fine," he says, amazed to find that even in a situation of such extremity as this, his dad can exasperate him. "What is this?"

“This is our pledge,” Dad says, “to a friend.”

“Carson.”

“Yes.”

“I don’t understand.”

“I’m not certain I do, either.”

“Dad?”

“Uh huh?”

“I’m scared.”

“Me, too,” his father says. “Every time, I think it’ll be easier. Somehow, it never is.”

“What do you mean?”

“Never mind. Don’t worry if you’re afraid. My sphincter’s got all it can do to control itself. Just stand and be true.”

“Huh.”

“What?”

“That’s nice,” Will says. “‘Stand and be true.’ Did you write it?”

“Thank Stephen King.”

“If this thing comes any closer, I won’t be thanking anyone for anything.”

“He won’t,” dad says. “*What he’s searching for isn’t here.* It hasn’t been for a long, long time.”

The bear narrows its eyes. The flames swirling around it flare, too bright to endure. Will shuts his eyes against the blaze, the insides of his eyelids lit red. This would be a perfect moment for the creature to charge, while the two of them are blinded. Although the *qiang* burns in his hands, he keeps its point aimed at the bear, hoping that, should it rush them, it’ll strike the end of the spear before the rest of the weapon bursts into flame.

“Steady,” his father says. “*What he wants isn’t here.*”

The interiors of Will’s eyelids glow white. Heat scorches his face, his arms. His clothes smolder.

“Stand,” Dad says. “*Stand,* William.”

“WILLIAM!”

Manda’s shout is accompanied by a pail full of water dashed in Will’s face. A single ice cube smacks his right cheek, directly below the eye. Will splashes backward in the tub, hands raised against the second pail of water his wife is preparing. The bathroom telescopes right up to him. “Okay,” he says, “okay, okay.”

“Are you all right?” Manda says. “Because for a second there, it looked like you were having a seizure.”

A seizure? he thinks. *Is that what all that was?* “I’m okay,” he says, lowering his hands. “I’m still sick, but I think the fever’s gone down.”

“Really?”

“Yeah.” He says this mostly to reassure Manda, but the words sound as if they might be true.

They are. The worst of his fever has passed, and while he will continue to feel the flu’s effects for days to come, he will not experience the same sense of dislocation—of relocation, of what he supposes must have been a febrile hallucination. (He doesn’t believe it was a seizure.) For a couple of weeks after he’s better, Will considers phoning his parents, sharing his overheated brain’s invention with his dad. *Maybe*, he thinks, *the old man can get a poem out of it.* A couple of times, he has the cell in hand, his parents’ number onscreen.

He doesn’t, though, for a reason he can’t specify. Next year, however, he’s first in line for his flu shot.

6

Do not run, the Park Service pamphlet warns—instead, turn,

Raise your arms, make yourself menacing,

Or the big cat will pounce.

Carson Lochyer “The Puma”

September of the year he turns forty, Will and Manda will take the girls out of school for two weeks for a family trip to Provence. They’ll go to meet Will’s mother and father, there for a two-day conference devoted to his

father's and Carson's poetry, which is being held at the *Université d'Avignon*. There's a chance Carson will join them. After moving from Toronto to Iceland, his dad's friend has continued eastward across the Atlantic, first to the northwest of Scotland for almost five years, then on to Holland, Germany, and now Finland, to a small town in Lapland whose name Will has saved on his phone because he finds it impossible to remember.

Through his father, Will has learned of Carson's rumblings of another departure, this one for a destination still more remote, Nepal or Mongolia. For the foreseeable future, Provence is likely his best chance to introduce Carson to his wife and children, none of whom has met him, since Carson rarely ventures back in the direction from which he came. Even his Pulitzer a couple of years ago could not dislodge him from his log cabin above the Arctic Circle; instead, Will's dad collected it for him. Will himself has not seen Carson in person since his departure from his parents' house almost three decades gone by. The desire to do so now grips him. From brief phone conversations and e-mail exchanges he's had with Carson over the years, as well as from what his father has told him, Will knows that Carson is aware of his career as a fishing guide, has read the write-ups on him in *Bass Pro* and *Sports Illustrated*, and has watched the clips of his appearances on a couple of the better fishing shows. But Will wants to see him in person, to shake his hand and thank him for his long-ago support. He wants to show him his wife and children, the best parts of his life. These last few years, there have been a couple of times he's been in close enough proximity to Carson's current address to consider dropping in for a visit, only to be dissuaded by his father. "You know Carson," Dad's said to Will's calls to check his address, "he's funny about his privacy." Will has heeded his dad's words and respected Carson's privacy; now, though, if Carso is joining them, then there's nothing to be concerned about. He even nourishes a secret hope of convincing Carson to accompany him for a little fishing on a couple of the local streams, and has packed an extra rod in case that hope becomes reality.

It does not. In fact, Carson does not fly down to meet them after all. In response to the news, Will's parents offer one another a philosophical shrug. Dana and Flora barely register the news, while Manda expresses her regret

for Will's sake. His parents know the region, to which they've been traveling since before Will's birth, sufficiently well to take the family on a number of day trips: to Nîmes, Les Baux, Arles, Les Saintes Maries de la Mer, and Aigues-Mortes. Both girls demonstrate a facility with French that surprises and pleases Will and Manda; by the end of their first week there, Dana and Flora are carrying on short, basic conversations in the language with their grandparents. Informed by their previous trips to the area, plus the advice of some of the professor and students from the university, the six of them search out fine restaurant after fine restaurant for lunch and dinner. Even Manda, whose parents ran a restaurant in Wiltwyck and is usually difficult to please in such matters, has no complaints. Will fishes here and there, but not as much as he—or any of the other members of his family—was anticipating. Strange as it sounds, he can't move past his annoyance with Carson for not showing up. *How many more chances*, he thinks, *are we going to have to see one another?*

He talks to his father about it over lunch on a day when his mom, Manda, and the girls are away at the open markets outside Aigues-Mortes. Dad doesn't say anything while his speaking, eating his *croque-monsieur et frites* with his head cocked slightly to one side in what Will thinks of as his listening pose. The depth of emotion in his voice, the venom with which he treats Carson's peculiarities, surprises Will. Once he's finished, he sits watching his father, half-eager for him to argue with his complaint.

Instead, his dad says, "You're right. Carson can be a real asshole."

"What?"

"How hard would it have been for him to fly here? He could have spent a night and left the next morning. The university would have paid for everything; although, it's not as if he couldn't have afforded it. Trust me: the Pulitzer does wonders for your bank account."

The bitterness in his father's words shocks Will. "Dad," he says, unsure what to say next.

"Never mind," his dad says with a grimace. "You brought another rod with you, right? Let's go fishing."

Will recognizes his father's tactic, attempting to use fishing to distract him from what's bothering him. It's a familiar technique, one his dad has

employed to meet any number of disappointments in Will's life, from the end of high school romances to failing his driver's test the first time he sat it. He hasn't used it for years, since a particularly difficult spell he and Manda went through after Flora was born. While his father has written about fishing in some of his poems, he's never been enamored of actual angling. For him to suggest it to Will is an index of his concern and love. "All right," Will says. "Why not? Let's go catch some trout."

No clear destination in mind, the two of them take his parents' rented Renault south, toward the Camargue with its marshes and canals. The afternoon is warm and bright. A French pop song neither of them can understand pulses from the radio. A series of right-hand turns down increasingly-smaller roads takes them, eventually, to a dirt parking lot off the left hand side of the road, next to a canal running between tall, thick reeds. It's as likely a spot as any. Will ties a couple of multi-purpose lures to the ends of their lines, and they set out along the water, following a path through the reeds made, Will supposes, by other fishermen. Within five minutes, the car is out of sight behind them. Were it not for a contrail tracking a jet's progress across the blue bowl of the sky, he and his father might have stepped back one hundred, two hundred, five hundred years into the past. On their left, the reeds fall back from a patch of grass sloping to the water. "This should do me fine," Dad says. Will fishes the spot with him for a few minutes, then sets off deeper into the reeds. He isn't worried about his father catching anything; already, Dad's eyes are focusing on that middle distance in which he appears to sight most of his poems. Reeds clatter against one another as Will pushes them aside. Ahead, on his right, there's something beside the path.

It's a piece of stone, rectangular, rising out of the earth like a headstone. Gray-white, its upper left corner worn away, its surface spider-webbed with cracks, the marker gives the impression of considerable age. This feeling is reinforced by the image barely-visible on it. Executed in the plain style of a medieval woodcut, a strange animal rears on its hind legs between a pair of simple trees. It's been carved in profile, and at first, Will thinks it's supposed to be a lion. The tail is wrong, though, segmented, insectile, capped with what appears to be a miniature sun. Nor is the head any more accurate: rather than following the line of the back, it rises into what might

be a man’s head (the wear is especially bad here). Unfamiliar symbols have been cut into the picture’s border, a circle broken at about the five o’clock mark, a double arch, a downward-facing crescent, others faded beyond identification. Will glances side to side, on the lookout for other markers. He isn’t sure what the purpose of the stone was. Neither its position nor its decoration indicate it stationed a pilgrimage route; nor is Will aware of major local battles it might commemorate. Probably a legend or tradition of the region. His father will know; he’ll ask him on the way back.

The two hours Will passes fishing the canal slide by in a dazzle of late-afternoon sunlight and sweltering heat. A couple of times, a fish investigates his lure, only to swim off without taking it. The sun turns the water platinum. Something rattles the reeds across the canal from him, but does not show itself. Random mosquitoes brave the heat and light for a chance at his blood; he crushes them against his arms and neck in red asterisks. Brightness fills his eyes, makes everything around him seem faded, less substantial. (“Easy,” his father says, somewhere in the recesses of his memory.) Finally, he decides he’s sat beside this stretch of water long enough. He hooks the lure to his rod and heads back toward the spot he left his dad.

On the way, he intends to have another look at the stone marker with its strange creature. He should have taken a picture of it with his phone. He’ll remedy that oversight when he reaches it. At the place where the stone rectangle stood, however, there’s nothing. Did he misjudge the marker’s location? He walks ahead fifteen, twenty feet, doubles back, peering into the reeds. Nothing. Could he have taken another path? It seems unlikely: there’s the canal a few feet behind him. He must have passed the rectangle longer ago than he realized. He shakes his head, still fuzzy with the heat.

As he continues on the path to the spot he left his father, Will notices that the landscape around him has fallen silent. There’s the clack of the reeds striking one another when he brushes them, the pad of his shoes on the earth, and that is all. No birds chirp or cluck or take flight with a whir. No insects whine or buzz or hum. No cars are faintly audible in the distance. He looks up, and sees no airplanes crossing the sky, the contrail he observed earlier long since blown away. It’s as if there’s only him, the canal, and the reeds.

And something else, he realizes. A kind of quiet within the quiet, out in the reeds maybe twenty feet to his left. He's spent enough time out of doors—sometimes very far out of doors—to know that there's animal in the reeds, keeping pace with him. He isn't certain what it could be. A deer? A dog, patrolling the border of whoever's property he's encroached upon? Hasn't he read about an uptick in the number of feral pigs in Europe? No, it's bigger than that. What if whatever it is came upon his father first? He knows he should maintain a measured pace, in order not to provoke a predator to the chase, but the best he can hold himself to is a kind of race-walk.

He finds his dad where he left him, slumped forward: asleep. Will shakes him awake a hustles him to the car before his father completely understands what's happening. He grumbles that Will interrupted a perfectly wonderful nap, but his voice is more amused than irritated. "Thought I'd checked out, did you?" his father says.

"Dad," Will says.

His dad assumes that the tightness of Will's jaw, the speed with which he drives back to the hotel in Avignon, are symptoms of his panic at thinking he'd found his father dead. Not until dinner, when they have met up with Manda and the girls and his mom, does Will reveal the true cause of his agitation, the animal pacing him. Manda, Dana, and Flora find his account of the experience giggle-inducing, and his concern at a possible feral pig pushes them to outright laughter, which his mother cannot restrain herself from joining in. Only his father does not laugh; although his lips grow thin from suppressing a smile. "Well," he says, "what do you think it was now?"

"I don't know," Will says. "Probably a rat," an answer which provokes a fresh burst of hilarity from the women at the table. "I'll tell you, though, it felt like whatever was out there was huge. Like, if I had seen a giant head rising out of the reeds, it wouldn't have shocked me."

Dana controls her laughter long enough to ask, "What kind of head?"

"A head," Will says. "I don't know, a person's head."

Over the girls' laughter, his dad says, "What makes you say that?" He is no longer fighting a smile.

“It was just how it felt,” Will says. He’s tempted to attribute the image to what was carved on the stone marker he found, but the continuing giggles of his wife, daughters, and mother has soured his desire to offer fresh material for their amusement.

“Huh,” Dad says.

“You going to use that in a poem?” Will says.

“Could be.”

Later that night, while they’re preparing for bed, Will tells Manda about the marker. She isn’t sure what its purpose was, either. Somewhere in the depths of the night, he dreams he’s facing a wall of reeds behind which something enormous is lifting into view. He sees flames. If he sees any more, though, it remains locked in the dream.

7

Within this round might two men find friendship,

The fraternity of shared interest

In the world’s secret language.

James Ogin “Rosenkreuz Serves Tea”

Much of the year he turns forty-two, Will will spend away from home. In the late winter, he’ll accompany a pair of investment bankers to the Salmon River in western New York state, where he’ll instruct them in fishing for salmon. Throughout spring, summer, and a good part of the fall, he’ll be booked solid taking groups of aspiring anglers into the Catskills to try for trout. Early the next winter, he’ll fly to Peru with a group of lawyers to a lodge with whose owner he’s become friendly, where he’ll teach those members of the legal profession to bait a hook for the local fish. It will be the busiest he’s been since he started the guide business, in part because he won’t feel able to turn away any of the bookings and the money they’ll add to the household budget. Dana will tag along on a couple of trips to the Catskills, and both girls will travel down to Peru with him, but otherwise, he won’t see a great deal of them.

At the same time, Manda, who made partner in her firm the previous year, will be lead defense counsel for a case in which a local ophthalmologist is

being sued for malpractice by a patient whose eye essentially collapsed during routine cataract surgery, which would be tricky enough, were the plaintiff not the mother of the state's attorney general. Her life will be an unending stream of phone calls, text messages, e-mails, and meetings, meetings with fellow counsel, with their client, with expert witnesses of various stripes. Between them, she and Will will joke, they contribute significantly to the local take-out places; though they'll strive for at least one sit-down family dinner every week (or two).

During this time, Will's mother will come for two extended visits, the first early in the summer, when she'll stay for four weeks, the second in the fall, when she'll stay for the five and a half weeks of Manda's trial. While she prepares dinner for whoever happens to be around, it's mostly to be with her granddaughters that she makes the trip from the house out in Bourne to which she and Will's dad have relocated since she retired from the college and he turned his *dojang* over to the black belt who'd been his right hand woman for years. At twelve and nine, respectively, Dana and Flora still require the presence of an adult (though Dana contests this). Will's mom talks books with Dana, who is an inveterate reader, and listens to the chapters of the novel her older granddaughter is writing. She drives Flora to the farm where her pony boards, and assists her in Clover's care. She takes the girls to the movies, on excursions to local parks, and to the art museum over at Penrose College. She makes them waffles for breakfast, grilled cheese sandwiches for lunch, and chicken korma for dinner. When she comes in the fall, she brings her dog, Dinah, with her. A gold and white boxer-bull mix, Dinah licks everyone and everything with her long tongue; the girls adore her, and argue passionately over whose turn it is to walk her.

At the end of his mother's second stay, Will takes her to dinner. Manda, whose case has concluded in victory for her client, has taken Dana and Flora for a girls' night out to their favorite restaurant, and though she invited her mother-in-law to accompany them, Will's mom demurred, saying that the girls needed time with their mother. Home from a late-season trip out near Roscoe, Will suggests a jaunt into Joppenburgh for a meal at Widow Jane's, a new-ish restaurant whose smoked fish pie has drawn a number of favorable reviews, including one from the *New York Times*. She agrees, and in short order, the two of them are seated at a small

table at the front of the busy restaurant. His mom has a Guinness; he has a Coke with lemon. Much of their pre- and dinner conversation concerns the girls: Dana's struggle with an obnoxious clique at school, Flora's newfound anxieties about death, and the girls' spats and squabbles with one another. As their plates are being cleared, dessert menus produced and considered, Will relates a couple of anecdotes about his most recent client, both of them of the can-you-believe-how-the-rich-behave variety. When his Irish coffee and Mom's apple-berry crumble have been served, Will says, "So: what do you have planned now? A month of rest and relaxation?"

His mother laughs. "No, I'm afraid I'm off again the day after I get back. Your father's accepting Carson's Bollingen for him, so we have to drive to Yale. Dad's doing a reading and signing while we're there. He might be visiting a couple of classes, too. At least it's close."

"Dad's accepted so many of Carson's awards, I'm surprised no one's tried to prove they're the same person."

"Once upon a time, someone might have. These days, though, there's enough documentation of Carson online for anyone who wants to verify his existence to do so. Not to mention, every few years, an enterprising young scholar tracks him down to whatever location he's retreated to and flatters an interview out of him."

"When was the last time Dad saw him?"

"They video-chat once a week. They haven't seen each other in person for a few years. The last time…I'm pretty sure it was while we were in Amsterdam for the Tang Soo Do internationals. Carson was renting an old farmhouse on a canal. Your father went out to have dinner with him. He said he might come in to watch Dad compete, but…"

"He didn't."

"He's always been funny about crowds."

"Unlike Dad," Will says.

"Yes," his mom says. "Protest all he likes to the contrary, Dad never met a group of people he didn't immediately try to win over. And succeed, most of the time. It helped him make the karate school such a success. It's the reason people will travel three hours to hear him read his poetry."

“Opposites attract, right?”

“You mean your father and Carson?”

“Well, yeah. It never occurred to me while he was living with us, but afterwards, I remember thinking how weird it was that these two guys should be such close friends. Here’s Dad, who grows up in the country, but not that far from the nearest town. Grandma and Grandpa were in favor of education. From what I can tell, they pretty much left him alone to read and write as much as he wanted. He’s Mr. Literature, almost all the way to the Ph.D. It seems as if he’s read or at least heard of everything.

“Then you’ve got Carson, who’s raised in the middle of nowhere. His parents don’t want to educate him any more than the bare legal minimum. It sounds as if they were more interested in putting him to work at their guide business. He works a million odd jobs; it seems as if there’s nothing he hasn’t learned how to do, from clean a fish to rebuild an engine. I guess the two of them have martial arts in common, but even there, Dad always treated it as a mix of sport and performance, while Carson was more interested in being able to cripple and maim people.”

“I suppose all that’s true,” Mom says. “It’s funny. Your father and Carson have been friends for so long, all I see now are the similarities. I don’t mean the karate, either. Their lives had more in common than you think. Yes, Dad’s parents were in favor of education, but they saw it as a means to an end. You went to school in order to become a lawyer or a doctor, so you could be your own boss. That was what your grandfather used to say to Dad, that he wanted him to work for himself.”

“Isn’t that what writing poetry is?”

His mother frowns comically. “Not if it doesn’t pay the bills. Your father’s parents were deeply suspicious of education for its own sake, let alone of a career writing poetry. I’m sorry,” she says, shaking her head, “I’m being unfair to them. They had been poor when they were very young—this was during the Second World War—and for them, being financially secure was very important. College was great because it allowed you to achieve that security in a way that going out and getting a job after you graduated high school didn’t. To use that opportunity for something else was…self-indulgent, and if you had a family, irresponsible. I don’t think I ever saw

your grandmother as happy—as relieved—as I did at the opening of Dad's *dojang*. She was still nervous about him teaching karate, but as far as she was concerned, it was a big step in the right direction. Had your grandpa been alive, he would have felt the same way. Dad writing poetry made them deeply nervous. Grandpa used to say, 'But how can you know if it's any good? It's all just someone's opinion.' Grandma treated it as a phase Dad was going through, as if he were experimenting with drugs, or voting Democrat.

"On the surface, you're right, Carson's upbringing was completely different. But his parents wanted him to be financially successful in the same way as Dad's family. For them, formal education beyond junior high was a distraction, a delay in earning money. They had a plan to make themselves comfortable, moneywise, and they assumed their son would help them fulfill it. If he talked about anything else, showed an aptitude for reading and writing, that was fine, he could write the brochures and ads for their guide service when he was a little older. Carson wanting to put his talent to other uses made no sense to them. Why would he want to go off and compose poems when there was money to be made at hand? From what I understand, there was some resentment at their son's desire for a life so utterly removed from theirs, as if he was criticizing them with his dream, belittling theirs.

"Both of them had it, though, a…a fire for language, for what you could do with it. Sometimes, I imagined Dad's work as a great library, like the one at Penrose, all Gothic revival, its windows ablaze with light. And sometimes, I would picture Carson's work as a bonfire roaring in the center of a forest clearing, its light falling on redwoods a hundred feet high. They recognized that flame in one another. For as long as he's known him, your dad has said that Carson does what he does with absolute integrity, absolute commitment. Carson's written the same thing about him. So…"

"The bromance of the age," Will says. His mother hasn't spoken of either his father or Carson in such terms before; he's moved, unsure how to respond beyond gentle ridicule.

"Something like that," his mom says. "There's really nothing your father wouldn't do for him."

“I’m just grateful Carson didn’t ask him to sacrifice his firstborn son for him.”

“Don’t be so sure,” his mother says.

8

You start with a sharp knife.

Carson Lochyer “Cleaning a Trout”

Autumn of the year Will’s father turns eighty-three and Will fifty, his dad will publish a memoir of his friendship with Carson Lochyer titled *Carrying the Lamp into Darkness*. A mix of essay and poetry, its occasion will be the fifth anniversary of Carson’s disappearance and increasingly-presumed death within the wilds of the Kamchatka peninsula in far-eastern Russia. Though he’ll bring the slender volume with him on every fishing trip he takes, Will will put off reading the book for an entire year, until a series of ferocious storms will strand him in Seattle’s Sea-Tac airport overnight. He’ll remember some of the exchanges his father relates, some of the scenes from Carson’s time with them his dad describes. The book skips around in time, moving from conversations recent to those of decades prior, and in subject, moving from poems to sports, from family to fellow poets. Dead-center in the book, Will reads:

There aren’t many poems I haven’t been able to write. This is not to say all of my work has been of equal success, only that I can count on one hand the number of subjects to which I could not fit an adequate verse-form. One of those was a story Carson told me in the weeks before he arrived to stay with me and my family following his divorce. The split from his wife had been sudden, swift, and merciless, and he came east in rough shape. For the first few months he was with us, he and I spent a couple of hours each night in front of the TV, watching reruns of *Family Guy* and *American Dad*, brightly-toned idiocy whose principle purpose was to kill time, to help move my friend thirty minutes further from his recent catastrophe. Some nights, he would retreat to his room afterwards; others, I would remove a bottle of single-malt from the liquor cabinet and pour each of us a couple of fingers’ worth. I didn’t know many of the particulars of Carson’s divorce; strange as it may sound, I hadn’t known much about his marriage in the first

place. Our conversations and correspondence had focused almost exclusively on poetry: our own, that of our contemporaries, of those who came before us. I expected, though, that at some point he would want—would need—to relate the story of his marriage's collapse, as a kind of therapeutic exercise.

One night in particular, I was certain Carson was about to unburden himself to me. This was in late September, after he had been living with us for five months. Until this moment, all Carson had said on the subject of his divorce was that it was entirely his fault. This declaration, combined with his lack of clarification of it, had led me to wonder if he hadn't been unfaithful to his wife, or guilty of something worse, violence mental or physical. Nothing in his behavior around me and my family gave my suppositions any support, but there are relationships that bring out a unique beast in us, and perhaps this had happened to my friend.

On the night of which I'm writing, Carson had two glasses of Balvenie I served him, a third, more substantial pour he served himself. Revelation trembled the air of the kitchen. He drank half his glass and said,

I ran away from home when I was eighteen. For the last time, I mean. I'd been trying to get away from my parents since my thirteenth birthday. A couple of times, I made it to Lewiston. There's a harbor, there, the furthest-inland seaport in the western U.S. I had an idea I'd play Jack London, sign on board a merchant ship and see the world. Couldn't find anyone to take me before my dad found me. When I was older, I tried jumping trains, but that was harder than I expected, too. The one time I actually succeeded in climbing inside an open boxcar, the train stopped an hour later, and the cops discovered me. Made Dad drive all the way there to get me. You can imagine how thrilled he was to have to do that. Eventually, I turned to hitchhiking, which a lifetime of my mom's warnings about perverts in cars had heretofore caused me to avoid. I encountered a few of them, too, though nothing I couldn't handle. None of my attempted escapes ever took me far enough away from my parents' reach. I might have a day or two in a town, but Dad always seemed to know right where to find me. He never failed to remind me that he knew his way around towns and cities; he'd lived in plenty of them before he and Mom pulled up stakes and headed for

the country. I, on the other hand, was just an ignorant hillbilly, ill-equipped for any life but the one he and Mom had raised me to.

How I hated him during those long drives back to whatever hovel he and my mother had christened home that month. The thing was, he owned two large footlockers full of books, a lot of them old hardcovers he and Mom had picked up at library sales and flea markets. There were a lot of the classics, Homer and Dante and Shakespeare, the Romantics, as well as paperback copies of Twain and Hemingway and Steinbeck. I was allowed to read whatever I wanted, as long as it didn't interfere with my chores. I went through every last one of those books, at least twice and in some cases half a dozen times. I could not understand how my parents could own all of these books, could cart them from place to place—and read them, yes, they read a lot of them—I could not understand how they could have this portable library and yet want nothing of what it represented. You know what I'm talking about.

I did.

That was what kept prodding me to get away from them. Sure, there was plenty of physical deprivation, beatings when I misbehaved, unhealthy and inadequate food, outrageous work conditions, and forget a doctor if you got sick, let alone a dentist if you had a toothache. But I sometimes think that, if I had shared their vision, embraced their plan to become the pre-eminent fishing guide service in central Idaho, I might have been willing to put up with those hardships and more, beside. Since I didn't, since I wanted a life completely removed from theirs, the lashes with the belt and the plain spaghetti and the carrying a fifty-pound pack fifteen miles upriver—and the strep throat, the bronchitis, and the pneumonia—all of was just piling insult on top of injury.

When I decided to run away the last time, I hit on a different plan. Before, I had always set out for civilization, for town and cities. It dawned on me that if I went the opposite direction, headed deeper into the wilderness, my chances of evading my dad would improve. We were staying in a trailer outside of Stanley, beside the Salmon River. You stepped out the front door, and there in the distance was the Lost River Range, like the teeth of a great, broken saw. I'd been up in the mountains with Dad dozens of times. I knew the course the Salmon River took through them, and I knew the smaller

rivers and streams that fed into it. The Salmon's also known as the River of No Return, and that struck me as a good omen.

On a Saturday night my parents were out at a dinner party at a rich client's ranch, I left. I loaded my outdoor gear into an old beater truck I'd bought the past summer, and headed for the mountains. The only thing I took from my parents was a copy of Yeats's Selected Poems. There was no doubt in my mind I was going to fail. My parents would come back early, or just as I was pulling out of the driveway. One of the neighbors we rarely saw would pick this moment to drop in for a visit. My truck would die. I wanted to race up the road with my headlights off: there was a full moon, and visibility was pretty good. But there was a state trooper who liked to ride around Stanley from time to time, and I didn't want to provide him an excuse to pull me over.

There's one major road that runs through Stanley. Smaller roads branch off from it. A lot of them don't go much further than a couple of hundred feet, to a clearing or someone's old cabin. A few of them extend a considerable distance, trails the loggers and miners used. After maybe half an hour, I turned onto one of these. I took the truck as far as it would go into the forest, parked it as best I could on what shoulder there was, so it wouldn't hinder anyone else's passage, and set out into the mountains.

For me, Eliot has it right: "there, you feel free." I was up in them for twelve months. There were a couple of deserted cabins I'd run across during my previous trips to the area. I made for nearest one of those, and set it up as my base of operations while I waited to find out if Dad and Mom had worked out my ruse. Once I was satisfied they hadn't, I moved to the second cabin, which was in better shape, better-suited for the coming winter. There was a lean-to beside it under which someone had stacked enough firewood to take me a good portion of the way through the approaching season. Tell the truth, I was half-expecting whoever had cut and stacked that wood to show up and take possession of the place. In that event, I didn't know what my plan was going to be.

Nobody appeared to lay claim to the cabin, though, and I remained there for the rest of my time in the mountains. Much of what I did every day related to staying alive, chopping wood to add to the store under the lean-to, setting traps for small game, foraging for plants that were safe to eat,

fishing, and making the cabin more weatherproof. I set aside time every day to read Yeats and to write. I'd brought a bundle of legal pads with me, and a handful of pencils, and I used them to write poetry. I'd read somewhere about Virgil writing ten lines in the morning, then spending the afternoon whittling them down to two. I took him as my model.

It was not an easy time. I rarely had enough food. No matter how sick or well I felt, the day's chores had to be seen to. Love Yeats though I did, I was soon desperate for something else to read. My poems were stale, derivative. I could have left, found my way down to Boise, but I was superstitiously certain that, within a day of setting foot in any sizable settlement, I would be found by my dad.

Winter arrived, and everything grew worse. The temperature plummeted outside and in. The warmth my fireplace gave ended about three feet from it. Snow fell for days, drifting to the cabin's roof. One night, a grizzly made a half-hearted attempt to get through the front door. I say "half-hearted" because I'm sure that, had it really wanted to, it easily could have broken in and had me for dinner.

Carson emptied what remained in his glass, tipped another couple of fingers of Scotch into it. He held out the bottle to me; I declined.

That bear. I don't know why it wasn't hibernating in a cave somewhere. I wish I could convey to you how afraid I was, to have this giant animal on one side of a flimsy barrier and me on the other. This was fear of an almost-entirely physical sort, in the pounding of your heart, the tightness in your balls, the shaking of your legs. The bear snuffled the edges of the door, snuffled them like a dog. It leaned on the door, and the hinges rattled. It pushed against the wood, and the door moaned. I had a rifle in my hands, a .22, but I had little faith in its ability to stop the grizzly before it reached me. I was as certain as I've been of anything that I was not going to survive the next five minutes.

But I did. I made it through the night, and I made it through the winter. That spring was most beautiful, the most astonishing time I'd ever known. Living with Dad and Mom, I had learned to hate and dread the end of winter, because that was when the guide business kicked into gear, and what respite I'd enjoyed while the snow was high was over. Months of frozen

whiteness, however, gave me a fresh appreciation for the warmth that trickled into the air throughout the day, for the colors emerging around me. Green—I hadn't realized how many shades of green there were around me, from the emerald of the new grass to the chartreuse of the moss, from the mint of the weeds to the jade of the evergreens. And the wildflowers opening all at once, gold and violet and vermilion and lavender. The air was clamorous with bird song. The streams and rivers were fast and frothing with the spring melt, but I brought my tackle to them and pulled fish bright and fighting from them. I was leery of a return visit from the bear or one of his cohort, but the few grizzlies I saw were at a considerable distance, and uninterested in me.

In late June, around the solstice, I came upon an unfamiliar stream while fishing the Salmon. I was in a spot where the banks were growing steeper, and I was wondering if it was time to turn for home. On my left, a broad stream tumbled down into the river. I didn't remember a stream in this location, but I wasn't overly familiar with this stretch of the Salmon, so I chalked up the discrepancy to poor memory. The stream descended from a canyon a hundred yards back. I couldn't recall the split in the surrounding hills any more than I could the water emerging from it. I decided to investigate.

I had the crazy notion that the canyon hadn't been here, previously, or the stream, either. There'd been a pretty serious earthquake in these parts when I was thirteen. Damaged buildings for miles around, killed a couple of kids on their way to school. Left twenty miles of broken ground. I hadn't felt anything in the way of an earthquake during the winter, but a smaller one could have happened, cracked open this hillside.

From the look of the stream, though, that wasn't likely. The juniper and fir lining its banks were thirty feet high, tall enough to have been growing for a time. As far as I could see, the stream bed was smooth, with no signs of any late upheaval. Where the banks drew up into canyon walls, there were no rockslides, no evidence the hill had been pried apart in the recent past. There was a narrow beach at the base of my side of the canyon. I walked up to and along it far enough to see that the walls opened out again after another twenty yards. Some kind of light was flickering in that area—I thought it was a fire, but the color was wrong, platinum instead of red and

orange. Nor was there any sound of trees burning. I continued towards the other end of the canyon. My eyes wandered to the rockface across the stream from me. It was difficult to be positive in the canyon's dim light, but I couldn't pick out any of the striations you'd expect to find in a patch of exposed rock that size. A single unbroken wall of rose-colored stone faced me. There was a patch of shadow at its base, a little ways back from me, which resembled a door, but I figured the similarity was due more to my imagination than what it was acting on.

Where the canyon walls fell off to either side of me, the stream collected in a small lake that caught the rays of the afternoon sun and angled them directly into my eyes. For a moment, I saw nothing but dazzle. I could hear something over the rush of the water exiting via the canyon, a kind of low, irregular humming. Gradually, my surroundings swam into view. Low hills surrounded the scene. Directly in front of me was the lake, which collected water that flowed into it from a stream on the right. Beneath the sunlight wavering on its surface, the water in the pool and of its tributary appeared black. I took this as an after-effect of the sun overwhelming my eyes. Across the lake, the light I had seen from the canyon twisted and blazed. By walking the shore to the left of the lake, I soon came to a flat expanse of pale, chalk-colored rock which extended into the water. It was the dimensions of a modest church or auditorium. At the other end of the rock shelf, in the approximate center of the lake, a tower of white fire shone like liquid metal. It was a squat construction, slightly taller than I was, as wide as it was tall. Even at the distance I was from it, a flame of that volume and color should be uncomfortably hot. I felt nothing. I advanced closer to the burning tower, and saw that it hovered above a round depression in the rock, which was full of a liquid that did not reflect the fire writhing over it. A stone cup sat on the rock in front of the pool.

I don't know what I was thinking. Or, it was as if my mind was running on multiple tracks, simultaneously. I was wondering if the flame might be the result of some kind of gas vent, and if that might account for its color and its lack of heat. I was also wondering if what I took for fire was water, steam, full of a mineral that was catching and reflecting the sunlight. I was thinking that this was among the stranger sights I'd witnessed, and debating the wisdom of being so close to it. If I'm being honest, then I have to admit

that I was telling myself, “Dad and Mom might be able to make some real money off this thing.” And I was watching myself, too, approach the shining fire, which never grew hotter. Some part of me must have been shouting, “What the hell are you doing?” but I don’t remember it. What I recall is the sense of absolute rightness that came over me as I walked toward the fire, as if I were doing exactly what I was supposed to. Shielding my eyes from the glare with one hand, I knelt and picked up the stone cup with the other hand. The surface of the cup was rough, sharp in places, as if recently and quickly fashioned. I dipped it into the liquid beneath the tower and held it up for consideration.

The cup was full of water. Dad’s years of warnings about the perils of unfamiliar water sounding in my ears, I raised it to my lips and drained it. The water was cool but not cold, tasting of nothing but itself. I weighed taking more, decided against it, and returned the cup to its place before the pool. I stood and retreated from the white tower. The humming I’d noted earlier had grown louder, become words I couldn’t quite make out, delivered in a slow chant by many voices. All around the perimeter of the rock ledge, the air was alive with figures, men and women, robed in pale flames, the ghostly echo of the blazing tower. It was difficult to say for sure, but I thought I recognized a couple of them. There was a man whose fiery beard framed the features of Whitman, another whose crown of flames sat above Dante’s aquiline nose and melancholy eyes. I couldn’t decipher their chant, but I understood that it was old, far older than even the oldest poems we know. This was what the hunters had sung in celebration after they brought down a mammoth. This was what families keened over their dead after they were done piling stones on them. These words had welcomed the spring and begged mercy of winter. They had named the constellations, enumerated the deeds of the beings they represented. I could feel my lips beginning to move in time to the chant’s rhythm, my tongue shaping itself to its sounds.

And then a great brass shout rang off the surrounding hills, a clanging note that drowned out the words of the fiery company and made me clap my hands to my ears. A wind rose from the ground and whirled around the stone ledge. The poets around me faded. Something was approaching. I felt it as a thickening in the atmosphere, as if something vast was pushing a

wave of air in front of it. I couldn't judge the direction of its travel; I had the impression it was going to bound out of the very air.

Before it could arrive, I ran. Pack bouncing on my back, I fled that place and its fantastic sights as fast as my legs would go. At my back, the wind roared. I sprinted through the canyon, along the shore that had taken me here, kicking stones into the stream as I went. I shot out of the canyon down the slope to the Salmon, already veering right, in the direction of my cabin. I knew I could hike for the better part of a day, and cover substantial ground in the process. I hadn't known I could run like this. My legs were in agony, my lungs burning, but I did not slow my pace until I had the cabin in sight. The moment I was through the door, I dropped the pack and went for my rifle. I passed the rest of the day and all of the night, until the sun rose the next morning, positioned at the front door, which I had open a crack, scanning the long meadow in front of the cabin for whatever had been on its way from the wind. Nothing showed. Not then.

I didn't return to the place. That's the question, isn't it? Did you go back? Was it still there? Did you invent the experience, hallucinate it, or did you stumble through a gap in our world to…some other place? I knew what I'd seen, what I'd heard, what I'd tasted. At least, I thought I did. I weighed another trip to the spot on the Salmon, but couldn't make up my mind about it. I wasn't especially worried that I'd imagined the place on the other side of the canyon, the flaming tower, the fiery poets. There was nothing in the rest of my behavior to indicate that I'd suffered a psychotic break. To be honest, I was more, much more concerned that the stone ledge had been real, that by drinking from the pool in it I'd drawn the wrath of…I didn't know what. I didn't want to find out, either.

Anyway, I was busy writing. In the days after my excursion up that stream, I started a series of poems that sounded less like poor imitations of all my reading and more like distillations of it, filtered through a style and a voice that felt like mine. You know, there are times you begin work on something, and right away, you can tell, this is going somewhere. There may be some bumps on the road—let's be frank: there may be blown head-gaskets, and washed out bridges, and sudden thunderstorms—but you can just about see your destination at the outset. These were the sonnets about trout-fishing with Dad. I had full confidence in what I was doing in them, and I was

pretty sure that they were going to announce me to the world. I worked on them daily, tirelessly, for eight, ten, twelve hours at a time. Beyond what was necessary for my immediate survival, I neglected everything in favor of the words pouring out of me. Wood lay ungathered, uncut, and unstacked. My traps had not been reset in weeks. The cabin had not received the maintenance it required, rotten boards replaced, gaps in the walls filled. By midsummer, it was obvious that I would not—could not—stay in this place another winter, not if I intended to continue writing. I decided that, come fall, before the weather turned too bad, I would pack my gear and head for Boise.

This was what I did; although I left about a week ahead of schedule. The fall had been and remained unusually warm, summer-like. I was reluctant to depart the location where I had broken through to my own voice, where I had written poems that seemed beacons lighting the way to what I might do, next. I may have been a little anxious about the effect a change of scenery would have on my poetry. The days were getting shorter, though, and I had no desire to be in the mountains when the weather changed.

I kept writing. Each night, I stood from the table where I worked, stretched, and went outside for a walk around the cabin. It was one of those things you do to give yourself momentary distance from whatever you're writing. I brought the rifle; I hadn't forgotten my encounter with the bear. I startled a fox, once, but that was it. A couple of weeks before I was planning to hike down to civilization, I strolled outside to see the top of the peak to my left in flames. Two-thirds of the way to its crown, a belt of red-orange encircled it, lighting the low-hanging clouds. While I knew forest fires were a possibility, the sight of the flames was shocking. I wondered if I'd have to clear out that night. I couldn't see for sure, but the fire appeared to be burning above the tree line. I hadn't heard thunder, seen lightning strike, nor had I noted hikers or climbers in the vicinity, earlier. As absorbed as I was in writing, though, it was conceivable I might have missed any of those.

As I watched, the band of fire rose up the mountain, as if it were a line of climbers carrying torches, ascending the summit. It moved faster than a person could, and with more uniformity. I couldn't figure out what it was, what natural phenomenon I was witnessing. The fire gathered at the very

top of the mountain, then leapt straight into the sky. It pierced the clouds and was gone.

How could I not have drawn a straight line between what I saw that night and the place beyond the canyon, with its tower of white fire? I tell myself that I must have made such a connection, but if I did, it failed to signify. I thought something to the effect of, *Strange things happen in the mountains*, but that was all. I did not recognize this incident as a consequence of my actions months before. That came three nights later.

It was after I'd put down my pen for the day and was lying in bed, reading Yeats. There was a sound in the woods at the far end of the meadow in front of the cabin, the crack and crash of a tree falling. I lowered the book and listened. Something big was pushing through the brush. At the same time, light stabbed through the gaps in the walls, beams of red-orange that filled the cabin with a dull glow. I rolled up from my bed, grabbed the rifle, and crossed to the front door. In spite of the light shining into the cabin, I was thinking it was the bear from last winter, come back for another visit. I opened the door the barest sliver, and at first, what I saw prowling the edge of the woods was a bear, the biggest kind I'd seen. It was enveloped in fire, an orange inferno that should have killed it immediately, whose heat I could feel a hundred yards away, but which the animal seemed not to notice. It voiced a roar that was the clashing of a huge bell, and I saw that it was no bear at all. It was nothing I'd seen before. The face was more like a man's, only bigger, and when it opened its mouth, it was full of rows and rows of teeth. I didn't want to look at the rest of it—I couldn't; the sight of it sent a sharp pain through the middle of my head. There was a tail of some kind, arched over its back.

I eased the door shut and stood with my back against it. The light within the cabin brightened as the creature moved out of the trees, into the meadow. I didn't think the .22 would make any impression on what I'd seen, but I didn't dare flee the cabin, lest I provoke it to chase me. There was nothing to do but stay where I was and await the thing's next move. It thrashed through the meadow, voicing its heavy, metallic roar. The air in the cabin warmed. Sweat weighted my clothes. I white-knuckled the rifle. This, I had no doubt, was what had been coming for me after I drank from the pool below the flaming tower—what I had summoned. It was near enough

that the interior of the cabin shone with a red-orange light, as if dawn were throwing its rays over the mountains. The structure shook with the creature's roars, dust dropping from the ceiling, lifting from the walls. The door was hot where I was leaning against it. I straightened away from it. There might be a fire raging in the meadow.

Whatever I had come to this place to do, it was not burn to death in a cabin. I caught the door handle, turned it, and pulled the door open. At the same time, I stepped into the doorway, rifle up, sighting along it to the spot where I guessed the beast was. There was a purity to the act that was wonderful, that filled me with elation, even though I was certain I was passing to my death.

Except I wasn't. The meadow was empty. The traces of the creature's presence were in evidence: the tall grass and wildflowers had been burnt down to the baked earth, where scattered flames continued to flicker. The outside of the door, that side of the cabin, were scorched black. Keeping the rifle at my cheek, I retreated inside to pull on my boots. Feet protected, I went outside and made, first a tight circuit of the cabin, then a foray into the meadow to stomp out the remaining fires. Once the last flame had been extinguished, I retreated inside and started to pack.

Carson emptied what remained in his glass. He did not refill it.

The next morning, I hiked out of the Lost River Range. I brought with me fifty-four poems, which I began submitting to literary journals as soon as I was settled in a room in a boarding house in Boise. The first was accepted for publication late the following winter. Days, I worked a succession of odd jobs. I started to take classes in combatives. That was how I met Willa, at my martial arts school. She'd received one too many advances from pushy guys who thought they should be the ones to date Boise's hottest meteorologist. She and I got together. I was promoted to assistant manager at my job, then manager. And while all of this was happening, the pages on the calendar peeling away, I wrote, what had started in the cabin in the mountains continuing to the room in the boardinghouse, then a small apartment, then Willa's condo once we shacked up, and finally to the house we bought in Hayley after she accepted the job there. I published a chapbook with a micropress. Robert Haas said some complimentary things

about it. The University of Virginia published my first full length collection of poems.

I know you know all of this. What you don't know is that the creature, the fiery monster, pursued me. It took years for it to track me to my apartment. At first, I didn't know it had found me. I looked out the living room window one night and saw flames on the roof of a building down the street, and assumed it was a normal fire. Only when the flames gathered into a sphere, which hung over the roof before bursting apart like a firework, did I understand that I had been located. The same night, I carried my meager belongings to my car and drove to a motel on the south side of the city. I stayed there for a couple of days while I considered my options. Willa had been asking me to move in with her, and she owned a nice condo in a suburb about a half-hour outside of Boise. I could chance taking her up on her offer, or I could get onto the interstate and let it take me where it would. The second option, I understood, was the prudent, the responsible one. But I loved Willa, loved the life I thought we could have together. I called her, told her I'd decided she was right, it was time for us to take the next step in our relationship.

Well. You see how right I was about that. Funny thing is, the beast didn't catch up with me again until the very end, after Willa had decided it was time for her to move onto bigger and better things, a move that did not require the encumbrance of me. Our marriage had been the axis holding the rest of my life in orbit. When it was over, everything went spiraling off in its own direction. Willa moved out, told me I could keep the house if I could afford it, which I couldn't. I didn't know what I was going to do; I literally could not think of it. I guess I was waiting to see what would happen, how much worse things could get. Then one night, one very late night when I was most of the way through a bottle of Scotch not half as good as this one, I gazed out the window and saw fire dancing on top of a hill about a mile away. This time, though, I decided I was going to confront the creature, was going to face it and let whatever happened, happen.

What was that?

Nothing. I left before it reached me. I saw it three days after the flames on the hill prowling the woods across the street from the house. For the last two days, I had been loading my truck, not in any particular order, more as

it occurred to me I didn't want to leave this book or that blanket behind. I'd been keeping an eye on the other side of the street, which was where I had a sense the creature would appear. I had a rifle, a Remington, better quality and caliber than the gun I'd carried in the Lost River Range, but I was no more optimistic of its efficacy against the beast. In the early evening of the third day, I heard the creature's roar, that metallic clang. I was finishing the second-to-last knot in the tarp I had thrown over my truck's bed. The front door of the house was wide open, as was the garage; all the lights were on inside. The house sat on a rise, which permitted me to look down into the woods opposite to where the air was flooded with orange light. From deep in the trees—from somewhere *deeper* than that—the creature padded towards me, flames twisting around it. Its broad face was blank as a statue's. My keys were in the front pocket of my jeans. I slid behind the wheel of the truck and pulled out of the driveway. I'd like to say I didn't look back, but of course I did.

A couple of weeks at another motel, you and your wife's generous invitation, and here we are. I don't know how long it'll take the thing to find me on the other side of the country. I'd like to think I've given it the slip, but I suspect that isn't the case. When it shows here, I'll throw my gear into my truck and hit the road. I fantasize about striding out to meet it, playing Hercules with the Hydra, Theseus and the Minotaur, but what chance would I have? I'm pretty fond of this life; if I can avoid leaving it too soon, I'd prefer to do so.

Now I reached for the Scotch and poured a generous portion of it into my tumbler. The story I'd sat listening to was impossible, more for the pages of the latest Stephen King than anything resembling daily life. Yet I never doubted its veracity once. I swallowed the single malt without tasting it and said, "Are you positive the creature is hostile?"

"It burned my house to the ground. Willa wanted to pin it on me, but the arson investigator said the fire originated from a point across the road, possibly from a lightning strike. Said it was the weirdest thing he'd ever seen."

"All right. And there's no way to fight it?"

Carson shrugged. “Nothing certain. I’ve done a little research here and there, but I’ve yet to hit on anything in the way of a definite solution. Until I do, I’m reluctant to experiment.”

“Could you placate it?”

“What do you mean?”

“Obviously, it came in response to your drinking from the pool. Is there any way you can apologize for that, atone for it?”

He shook his head. “Not that I’ve read. And to be frank, I wouldn’t if I could.”

“Come again?”

“You’re the classics guy. What do you think that water was? It was the Pierian Spring, or something like it. Do you think it’s a coincidence I found my voice after I drank from it?”

“As I recall, none of the myths mentions a monstrous guardian.”

“That’s because this was the thing itself, not some earthly analogue. Taste its waters, and you’re trespassing on what’s supposed to be the gods’.”

“Then why hasn’t the creature caught and punished you?”

“I don’t know. I ran across something online that said there are very specific ways something like this can intersect our world, our reality. Maybe that’s it. I’m not complaining.”

“This website, the one that gave you this information, did it offer any suggestions for dealing with the beast?”

“No.” Carson stared straight at me as he said this. I had the momentary impression that, within the depths of his pupils, I could pick out twin points of fire, burning white. For the first time that evening, I was almost certain my friend was lying to me.

There is nothing else in the book like this. The memoir, if that’s what it is, contrasts sharply with the remainder of the volume’s more prosaic contents. It’s like finding a shark swimming amidst a school of trout, incongruous, absurd. The reviews of the book he pulls up on his phone express a similar sentiment, with greater and lesser degrees of pique. The *New York Times* accuses his father of having “turned Carson Lochyer into a character in an

elaborate fantasy intended to elevate his late friend to mythological status (thereby, one suspects, accounting for his own failure ever to equal Mr. Lochyer's achievement)." The *Washington Post* compliments his dad for "an inspired bit of ventriloquy which makes Carson Lochyer into a kind of Ahab-in-reverse, relentlessly pursued by the same monster that gave his life its purpose."

Will intends to ask his dad about the piece himself. He wonders if it's a kind of stealth tribute to Stephen King, one of his father's favorite writers. (Carson, he remembers, preferred Cormac McCarthy's novels.) He dials his parents' number, but the call is shunted to voice mail. Ah well, it can wait until he's home.

When Manda greets him at the front door the following afternoon, however, it is with tears in her eyes, and the news that his father is suddenly dead.

9

Gone the grim gods of my grandfather, who
Demanded a man meet mortality
At the stroke of a sharp sword, and arrive
Among them a fit companion, worthy
To sing his own deeds.
James Ogin "The Death of Wiglaf"

There will be a larger crowd at Will's father's wake, and funeral, and the reception after the funeral than he will anticipate. Family will come, of course, his father's surviving siblings, his younger brother and his wife, and his youngest sister and her husband, along with a mass of cousins and their children and, in a couple of cases, grandchildren. Manda's parents will fly in from their retirement villa in Arizona; her older brother and his wife and two children will drive over from Boston; and her younger sister and her husband and daughter will rent a car and drive up from Brooklyn. He and Manda will host her parents and Will's mother, who will alternate between stunned acceptance of her husband's death (from a stroke) and torrential weeping. The members of both families will be joined by friends ranging from close to acquaintance. There will be former colleagues of Will's

mom's, from when she taught at SUNY Huguenot. A large contingent of his dad's karate students will appear, each of them bowing to Will and Manda as they shake their hands and offer their condolences. There will be white-haired, wrinkled poets whose younger selves stood laughing or talking with his father in photos forty years old. There will be poets Will's age and younger, who will hold his hand too long as they tell him how important his dad's work was to them when they were younger, the possibilities it suggested to them. There will be a few complete strangers, come to pay their respects to a man whose lines signified something to them and some crucial juncture in their lives.

Surprised and pleased by the number and variety of women and men who appear to mark his father's passing, Will has the odd sensation that his dad is slipping away from his private recollection of him to the collective remembrance of the public. Since his teenage years, he's been aware of his father's identity, his persona, as a poet, a literary figure. It's always seemed to him that there was the slightest bit of daylight between who he thought his dad was and who his father's readers thought he was. With his death, already Dad is becoming a Name, which Will supposes he must have wanted but which weights him with melancholy on top of his grief.

Because Carson Lochyer has not been declared legally dead, there has been no formal memorial service for him, nor is one planned for any time in the near future. Due to this, and to their long-time friendship, Will's father's wake, funeral, and post-funeral reception become an impromptu memorial for him, too. Dad, Will supposes, would approve.

The night of his father's funeral, after his mom has taken a sedative and retired to bed, and his in-laws have gone off to the other guest room, and Manda and Flora have kissed him good night, Will sits at the kitchen table with Dana, a bottle of eighteen-year Talisker open between them. They drink the Scotch slowly, allowing it time to loosen their tongues and unlock their memories. The stories they exchange of Dad, Grandpa, aren't all that different from those he imagines most people tell in such situations. Will talks about the time his father dropped everything to drive out to Wood's Hole so he would be in time to meet the afternoon ferry from Martha's Vineyard. On it was the twenty-year-old son of one Will's mom's friends from college in Scotland. The son, whose name was Lance, had taken a

summer job at an expensive hotel on the island for which he had been disastrously unsuited and from which he had been fired in short order. For reasons Will can't remember, Mom's friend was unable to get to her son. Dad volunteered to pick him up from the ferry and bring him to their house, which he did. A couple of days later, he drove Lance to Newark for his flight back to Edinburgh.

Dana speaks of her years studying in Grandpa's *dojang*, of how amazing it was the first time she saw him break a pair of boards with a jumping front kick, this big man leaping into the air, the boards snapping with a sound like a book slapping shut. How old would she have been? Six, seven? Old enough to remember the event. And afterwards, he was still Grandpa, his hair a mess, his face sweaty, his hairy chest visible at the top of his *dobak*. At the same time, he wasn't Grandpa, or not the same Grandpa. It was as if there was all this energy radiating from him, this…fire. Does that make sense? his daughter asks and, Yes, Will answers, it does.

At some point after the kitchen has been reduced to a quasi-cubist backdrop that spins whichever direction Will turns his head, Dana pushes away from the table, mumbles that she has to get some sleep, kisses the top of her father's head, and sways away in the direction of her room. There's a scrim of alcohol coating the bottom of the bottle of Talisker. Will lifts the bottle, pronouncing, "*Slàinte Mhath*," his father's preferred toast, and downs the last of it. He should find his way to his and Manda's room, but the combination of whisky and exhaustion makes this appear an insurmountable challenge. Nearer by far, the living room couch seems a safer bet. Almost knocking over his chair, he stands and, hands out to either side to aid what balance remains him, he wobbles into the living room where the blue and white striped couch is waiting to receive him. Will sinks into its cushions. Briefly, he has the sensation of falling, as if unconsciousness is a pool he's plummeting towards, and then he's asleep.

The dream that envelops him is of the kind so vivid as to be indistinguishable from waking. It begins with him sitting up on the couch. The air around him vibrates the way it does in the immediate aftermath of a great sound. Dim light sketches the contours of the living room's complement of seats and cabinets. He must not have turned off the kitchen light. Rising on stiff legs, he crosses to the kitchen doorway, reaches

through it, and flips the light switch. The kitchen darkens, but the living room remains full of a soft orange glow. It's coming from the windows, seeping into the room around the edges of the curtains. Dawn? It can't be: the sun rises on the other side of the house. Will walks to the picture window and parts the curtain veiling it. Through the glass, through the trunk and branches of the cedars in the front yard, he sees flames at the edge of his property. He rushes to the front door, unlocks and opens it, and runs outside onto the front porch of the house in which he grew up.

Startled, he looks from side to side. To his right is the wooden rocking chair his father liked to sit and read in when the weather was mild. To his left hangs the hummingbird feeder in the shape of an oversized strawberry. Before him, the ground runs level for the length of the short yard, dips into a gully, then rises in a steep hill to the road. Fire burns up there, too—or maybe it's the same fire. At the top of the stairs descending to the yard, he sees the *qiang*, the Chinese spear, leaning against one of the posts. He steps forward and grabs hold of it. The haft is smooth to the touch. Does this mean his father…? He hurries down the steps.

Holding the spear at his side, Will jogs along and up the driveway. Red-orange light makes a Halloween scene of the woods to either side. His thighs protest the driveway's grade. Ahead on the left, he spots Mr. Tumnus's Lamp, a black sketch on orange construction paper. There's someone a few feet to the right of the lamppost, a silhouette whose slight stoop causes his heart to pound. Eyes focused on that figure, Will forces himself to sprint the last few yards to the road.

Bathed in red-orange light, his father is waiting for him. He looks much as he did the last time Will saw him alive, his beard in need of a trim, his hair thin but not gone, his brow and the sides of his mouth grooved with deep lines. He's let the robe he was wearing drop to his feet, which are bare. He's dressed in a pair of worn karate pants and his favorite *Famous Monsters of Filmland* t-shirt, the one that shows Godzilla squaring off against Gamera. In his right hand, he holds the *do*, the curved Korean sword, point to the ground. He's smiling, as if he's about to share some groan-inducing piece of humor.

Will stops, says, "Dad."

His father nods, reaches over and pulls Will into a hug. His dad feels real, far more so than the body in the casket against whose still, cold brow he pressed his lips before the coffin's lid was secured. Will steps back, his throat full. "Dad," he says again, because he wants to speak and can't think of anything to say.

"Will," his father says. "I wasn't sure you'd make it. I should have known."

"What do you mean?"

With his left hand, his dad gestures at the other side of the street. Will supposes he must have seen what his father directs his attention to as he crested the driveway, but ignored it, all his attention focused on his dad. Now he sees the half-dozen trees across the road burning, their crowns great torches casting fiery light about them. The trees behind them are aflame, as well, and so are the trees beyond them. Several details strike him at once. Instead of descending the slope on the opposite side of the street, the trees continue back on a level surface. That surface is a white sand rich in crystals, which catch the light and flare like miniature stars, describing strange constellations on the ground. Though the tops of the trees are balls of fire, the trunks below them are unblackened. In fact, Will feels no heat whatsoever from them.

"*Luceo non uro,*" his father says.

"What?"

"A private joke." Dad raises his sword, takes it in both hands, and assumes a middle guard. Will grips the spear in his hands and holds it in front of him. "This," he says, "is not what I remember."

"No," his father says, "I don't imagine it is."

"What is it?"

"It's what we actually saw, that long-ago night. Or close enough."

"What are you saying?"

"I'm saying your mind constructed another memory to stand in for this one, because this was too much for it. A bear, wasn't it?"

"The biggest one I ever saw."

“For me, it was a man. He stepped onto the road in hand-tooled leather cowboy boots. He was wearing jeans, a white shirt, and a leather jacket. His hair was long and black, and he had no face.”

Will shakes his head. “I can’t… All right,” he says, “if I didn’t see a grizzly, and you didn’t see a guy without a face, then what did we see?”

His dad tilts his head toward the burning trees. “It’s coming.”

Squinting against the glare, Will peers into the ranks of trees facing him. Amidst the trunks, something moves, winding its way between the trees toward them. Big as a Clydesdale, bigger, it pads forward, its shaggy head low. Will sees muscular flanks, huge paws, thinks, *Lion?* Its tail hoists behind it, a segmented arc that extends almost to its shoulders. A knob bristling with spikes caps the tail. *Not a lion.* He says, “What *is* it?”

“The guardian,” Dad says.

“You mean like in that thing you wrote about Carson?”

His father’s eyebrows lift with pleasure. “You read that.”

“I did.”

“Then, yes.”

“It was true—the story?”

“As true as I could make it. Carson found his way to another place, where he drank from a spring and summoned the creature appointed to guard it.”

“It doesn’t sound any less crazy, hearing you say it.”

His dad shrugs. “There are more heavens and earths—and hells—than are dreamt of in your philosophy.”

“Great.”

“If it’s any consolation, I didn’t believe Carson’s story, either, the first time I heard it. Not as literal truth.”

“What changed your mind?”

“A couple of days before Carson left, he and I walked up here—”

“And saw the fire on the other side of the valley,” Will says. “I was there, remember? It…moved, danced.”

“Yes,” his father says. “That’s right, you were there. Anyway, watching those flames move on the side of the ridge did the trick.”

Across the road, the creature reaches the edge of the tree line and pauses, its armored tail thrashing behind it. Although its body is that of a lion—a monstrously-large lion—the face framed by its heavy mane is a man’s, grown to a giant’s proportions. Its eyes shine, windows to a furnace. It opens its mouth, and Will sees row upon row of sharp teeth receding down its gullet. Its roar is the metal song of a full complement of cathedral bells. The fiery tree tops shiver at it.

Will winces, but does not release the *qiang*. He expects the thing to take advantage of its roar’s effect to charge him and his father. It does not. Once enough of his hearing has returned for him to hear himself speak, he says, “Remind me what we’re doing here, again.”

“We’re the anchor,” his dad says.

“The anchor?”

“Like a distraction, but more lasting.”

“How so?”

“The guardian doesn’t have the same relation to space and time as we do. What little information Carson had been able to turn up on it told us this much. In order for it to spiral in on its prey, it was necessary for the creature to maintain its focus on them. If you could find a way to draw its notice away from its target, you might be able to split its concentration.”

“To what end?”

“Ideally, the beast would become confused, lost, like a dog off the scent. If not that, then the red herring would act as a drag on the guardian, slowing it enough for Carson to maintain his lead on it.”

“An anchor.”

“Exactly.”

“I take it this has something to do with why I dream about that night every October.”

His father nods. “You aren’t remembering it—it’s still happening.”

“What do you mean?”

“Having confronted it, you and I became entangled in its time. Not enough for us to be trapped in it, but sufficiently for a part of us to remain in this moment. Carson was not happy with the plan; he said there was too much risk in it.”

“It sounds like Carson was right,” Will says. “Didn’t you think it was maybe a little dangerous to bring your twelve-year-old son with you to confront a Goddamn monster?”

“Language.”

“Answer the question.”

“Of course I recognized the danger,” his dad says. “But we had to make a convincing display to the creature, and you knew how to handle the spear. You thought the world of Carson. I assumed if I’d told you what I was up to, you would have wanted to join in. Plus, I was reasonably sure the guardian wouldn’t attack us.”

“Reasonably isn’t the certain I prefer,” Will says. “Though you’re right, had you asked me, I would have agreed to help.”

“Well, I’m sorry I didn’t.”

“Don’t let it happen again. So did your plan succeed?” Will says. “I assume the thing finally caught up to Carson in Russia, but until that point, he seems as if he was doing okay.”

“Look,” Dad says, dipping the point of his sword at the waiting creature.

Enlarged, its features are exaggerated. Will sees the deep-set eyes, the high cheekbones, the rounded chin, and recognizes the face as Carson’s. He steps back. The tip of the *qiang* drops. It’s as if he’s been punched in the solar plexus; he can’t seem to draw enough air into his lungs. He leans forward. Of all the fantastic sights to greet him tonight, this is one too many, the piece of straw that cripples the camel. He finds enough breath to whisper, “What the fuck?”

His father’s hand falls on his shoulder. “Steady,” he says. “It’s all right. It’s okay. Come on. It’s all right.”

Gradually, his chest loosens, and Will straightens. His dad is watching him. His right hand remains on Will’s shoulder; his left keeps the *do* trained on

the creature, which observes the two of them with its burning eyes. Will lifts the spear and centers it on the thing's chest.

"Carson finally confronted the guardian and killed it," Dad says.

"What? When?"

"The first time was during his stay in Scotland. He'd rented a house in the Highlands. It sat at one end of a glen to which a narrow valley gave admission. He'd selected it precisely for its layout. He spent a summer digging a deep pit where the valet was at its most narrow. He filled the bottom of the hole with Punji sticks he fashioned from eight foot two by fours. He stitched together three of the biggest tarps he could buy, and secured them over the pit, scattering dirt on them to disguise the trap. The night the guardian appeared, he stood on one side of the tarps, a homemade spear in one hand, an axe in the other. The creature ran at him, and plunged into the pit. It heaved and sank, dealt a half-dozen mortal wounds. Carson waited until it was quiet, then lowered himself into the hole and beheaded it. He buried it right there, shoveled all the dirt and rock he'd excavated on top of it.

"He was pretty happy. He talked about returning to the States, coming to visit us. First, he had a book to finish, interviews to respond to, introductions to write. All of it took him longer to complete than he'd anticipated, but what difference did that make? He was free of his pursuer.

"Late the next summer, it returned. There were the familiar warning signs: he dreamed he was back at the pool in the rock; the weather was unusually warm; he heard the faint echo of the creature's voice, somewhere in the surrounding hills. He tried to dismiss them, discount the dreams and sounds as byproducts of stress surplus from years of being chased, the spike in the mercury as a fluke. When he looked out the window one evening to see fire lighting the top of the nearest hill, he knew his previous effort had failed, and the beast was on its way. He considered fleeing, but the success he'd had made him bold, and he decided to stay and fight. There was no time to construct another elaborate trap, so he settled on a simple one. He built a number of rudimentary bombs and positioned them just beyond his prior trap. As the creature stepped into their midst, he detonated them. The storm

of shrapnel cut the guardian to pieces. This time, he dismembered it and disposed of the limbs at considerable distances from one another."

"I'm guessing this didn't work, either."

"You're right; it didn't. He spent one more year in Scotland, and left after his first dream of the creature. He killed it several more times, once in Germany, once in Finland, twice in Nepal, and once in Mongolia. There may be another I'm forgetting. He used everything he could lay his hands on against it, shotguns and rifles, wolf and bear traps, dynamite. He drowned it; he electrocuted it. The creature died and died and died, and returned and returned and returned, never any less relentless. Had it not been for you and me, restaging our confrontation with the guardian year after year, adding weight to our anchor with each repetition, the creature would have had Carson on a couple of occasions.

"Eventually, he grew tired of running. He had come to Tilichiki, a small town on the northeast coast of the Kamchatka peninsula. When next the guardian came for him, he told me, he was going out to meet it with an axe and a machete. There would be no more traps, no more experiments to discover if this means of death might be the one to slay the beast for good. He had called to say goodbye; he knew his chances of surviving such an encounter, even with our anchor, were slim.

"There was nothing I could say, not really, but I did offer a suggestion. If he overcame the creature again, this time, maybe he should try eating it?"

"Eating it?"

"It's an ancient means of absorbing your opponent's power. To be honest, what suggested it to me was an essay I'd been reading, in which the writer compared the job of the critic struggling to come to terms with a poem to that of a hero fighting a monster. The only solution, the writer decided, was for the critic to consume the poem. All of this was clever metaphor, needless to say, but it occurred to me as a tactic Carson had yet to employ."

"Obviously, he did."

"He phoned a couple of days after that last fight. Although the connection was terrible, I could hear the severity of his injuries in his voice. He'd lost an eye, an ear, had his scalp laid open. His torso was riddled with puncture wounds, from the creature's tail. He suspected its spines were envenomed,

because the wounds had swollen and were leaking pus. His left hand and forearm had been crushed, and his left foot torn most of the way off. But he had done it, he said, had stabbed the beast in two of its three hearts, severed its tail at the base, and split its skull with his axe. As soon as he could move, he bound his wounds as best he could and started gathering wood for a fire to roast it. Its hearts were tough, he said, and he burned them but he'd had better luck with its liver, or what he thought was its liver. What was bizarre was he'd had no appetite at all, but the second he put that first piece of flesh into his mouth, he'd been ravenous.

"That was the last I heard from him. I assumed his injuries had been too severe for him to survive. Apparently, something else happened."

"Apparently," Will says. "What do we do now?"

His dad studies the creature facing them, Carson, or what Carson has become. He lowers the *do*, and holds it out for Will to take.

Will does. "What is this?"

"I think I have to go with him."

"You have to?"

"I'm supposed to—it's what makes sense."

"Makes sense? How?"

"Symbolically."

"Are you serious?"

"It's the kind of logic these types of places follow."

"And if you're wrong?"

"Avenge me, oh my son," Dad says, and grins.

"This is not funny," Will says.

"It is what it is." His dad turns to him. "You're a good man, and I'm proud of you. It's been my privilege to be your father, and I love you."

Their embrace doesn't last as long as Will wishes it would. How could it? He doesn't bother wiping the tears that fracture his vision. "Why?" he says. "What made you agree to help him?"

“He was my friend,” his father says. “I had to. Not to mention, how could I pass up a chance to see an actual monster?”

And then he’s away, striding across the pavement to where the creature that bears his old friend’s face waits beside trees whose blooms are fire. As he walks, he calls out, “Hail, guardian of the sacred spring! Hail scourge! Hail psychopomp!”

The beast opens its mouth, full of fangs, and roars its awful welcome.

> Tell me a story.
> Make it a story of great distances, and starlight.
> The name of the story will be Time,
> But you must not pronounce its name.
> —Robert Penn Warren, *Audubon: A Vision*

Inundation

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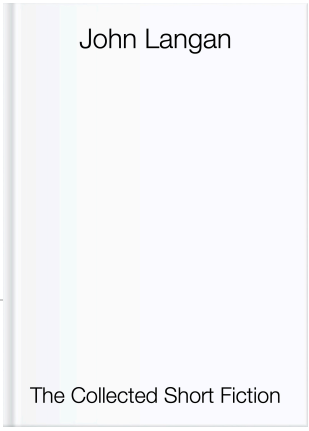

There is water coming into the basement.

It's an old basement, fieldstones stacked and mortared together, a dirt floor. Water bubbles up from the dirt, arcs from gaps in the mortar. A trench runs along the periphery of the basement, intended to channel the annual spring seepage to the room's northwest corner, where a sump pump in a round hole waits to push the water through a black plastic pipe out the front of the house, where it will run down the short, steep front yard to the street with its deep gutters. But the pump is designed for modest floods, an inch or two at most, not the briny two and a half feet that has accumulated already and shows no sign of diminishing. The pump continues disgorging water outside, but since there is water springing from the front yard, fountaining out of long cracks in the street, transforming the asphalt into a muddy stream, it's fair to say it isn't helping the issue. Water pours over the other side of the street, downhill to the house built there, striking its foundation with a dull hiss, churning up against its front door. Did the neighbors get out? Their Subaru is parked beside the house, submerged to the bottom of its doors in the swirling water. This does not augur well for Lena and Mike and their daughter, Jo. On the other hand, they had a boat, didn't they? A canoe they secured to the roof of the car for weekend excursions? So maybe the three of them piled into that and paddled for higher ground?

Should the waters swallow the neighbor's house, which looks ever more likely, that is the plan for Mick and his husband, Vin, and their son, Edward: use the boat they've improvised outside the garage to float to safety. Already, Edward is on the vessel, surrounded by a barrier of suitcases, knapsacks, and duffel bags, each filled to bursting with as much of the house as they could squeeze into them. Vin continues his last minute inspection of and adjustments to the boat, checking the cords that lash the

heavy plastic barrels to the platform, the seal on the boards of the top deck, the plastic sheeting sandwiched between it and the lower deck. He wanted to add gunnels to it, if only lengths of plywood nailed upright, but there hadn't been time. He settled for a three-foot post at each corner of the platform, clothesline wound around them to form a rope perimeter. Water foams around his shins, sliding in a long sluice down the ridge behind their house. Mick feels a twinge of anxiety that it might lift the boat and sweep Edward away from them, but Vin has employed a pair of thick chains to anchor the vessel to their Jeep on one side and the garage on the other.

From his spot at the side door to the house, Mick can look left to Vin and Edward, right to their neighbor's house (around which the water has risen, finding an entrance to the structure in a window that has collapsed under its pressure), and straight ahead along Main Street—Main Stream, more like. The local radio station's last broadcast included a report of something sighted in that direction, a gray, leathery hump the size of a barn, rising in the vicinity of what had been Sturgeon Pool and then sinking again. For the last three days, similar stories have come from points up and down the eastern US as the water has erupted. Before they lost Wi-Fi and cable, there were images, photographs and videos, the majority of them blurred, difficult to distinguish, full of immense shapes and shadows, a few frighteningly clear, a gray fin rising behind a sailboat, something like a hand grabbing the bridge of a trawler. Anecdotal evidence indicates creatures larger still, capsizing Coast Guard vessels, shouldering aside supertankers. Mick finds the prospect of animals of such dimensions terrifying. He remembers a whale watch he and Vin took out of Provincetown early in their relationship, and the queasy sensation that squeezed his stomach once they found a trio of humpbacks as he gazed down at them and realized each whale was the length of their ship, and more, the whales were in their native element, whereas he and Vin and the other passengers were intruding. (At the same time, a secret part of him, which continues to delight in old movies about giant monsters wreaking stop-motion mayhem upon major cities, is made giddy by the thought of these things, come alive.)

Vin gives him a thumbs-up, shouts, "Come on!" He hates leaving things to the last minute, while Mick is chronically late. Opposites attract, and all

that. Given the situation, it's probably best they do things Vin's way. He turns for a final look into the house, at the area beside the side door that's served as his home office, whose bookcases still have too many volumes on their shelves, and at the long room beyond it, for which they never found a suitable purpose. Edward used it as a play space, carrying his wooden Thomas trains and tracks down from his room and filling the vast carpeted floor with rail lines. How often did Mick put aside whatever article he was supposed to be writing to assist him? It's something his son has always loved to do, gather his toys and arrange them into elaborate scenes, frequently with an accompanying narrative. He's used the back room, the kitchen, the staircase, the upstairs bathroom, his bedroom. His toys have congregated on the stoop outside the side door, in the back seat of the Jeep, in the side yard. What Edward christened his set-ups have occupied him in all manner of weather, from humid summer to frost-bitten winter. Lately, he's been obsessed with water, enlisting Mick and sometimes Vin's help in digging shallow trenches and holes in the yard, at one end of which he tipped a jug full of water, creating a miniature river that swept aside those toys unfortunate enough to find themselves in its path, filled the first hole to overflowing, and raced through the channel to the next hole, carrying more hapless toys with it. All the while, Edward voiced the toys' distress, saying, "Oh no!" and, "Aaaah!" and, "Help!" When everything started happening with the water everywhere, Vin asked Mick if he thought Edward's play might have been connected to it, if their son wasn't plugged into it in some way, you know, psychically. Mick told him not to be ridiculous.

'The Fracture': that's the name the cable news channels settled on to describe what continued to happen. A break in the barrier separating their world from another occupying almost the same space, a watery place teeming with all manner of strange fauna. A couple of pundits referred to the other world as 'Atlantis', and given the steady rise of the waters here, Mick thinks that word might have a better claim to it. No one is certain how long the catastrophe is going to last, how high the waters are going to rise. The last broadcast to come across the transistor radio advised those who could to head for the Catskills, to higher ground, so that's their plan. If the Catskills go under, then Mick guesses they'll try for the Adirondacks, a

considerably further destination. Beyond that, he doesn't want to contemplate.

"Come on!" Vin waves him toward the boat, which shudders as the water begins to lift the barrels. Mick closes the door on this, the first house they bought, purchased with the help of the first-time home buyer's tax credit, back when the crash of the housing market was the definition of calamity. He steps from the stoop into the roiling waves.

Something slides under his foot, a piece of debris jammed against the base of the stoop by the current. For a moment, Mick is confident he can maintain his balance, and then he's going over, splashing into water that is deeper than he realized, that is already carrying him down the side yard toward the street. He twists onto his belly, grabbing at the ground for purchase it refuses to offer. Salt water slaps his face. The house rises high above him as he drops to the street, under the water streaming there, cracking his chin on the asphalt. Stars flare before his eyes. He pushes to his hands and knees, back into the air, grateful for the road's roughness, giving him a way to brace himself against the flood threatening to continue his journey across the street and down to his neighbor's front lawn. This current is frighteningly intense. He isn't sure how long he can maintain his position. He's on the verge of panic when he sees Vin descending the yard toward him. Due to the rope tied around his waist, and looped over one of the boat's corner posts, he's much steadier on his feet. In short order, he's standing beside Mick, one hand under Mick's right arm, shouting to him to grab hold of the rope, use it to get to the boat, he'll be right behind him.

Relief surges through Mick's chest, tightens his throat. He turns to say, "I love you," to his husband, and catches sight of a figure standing in the middle of the street, maybe a hundred feet from them. It's shaped like a man, albeit one seven and a half feet tall, heavy with muscle. The skin of its arms and legs is ghost white, the hue of things used to living far from sunlight. Rough bronze armor wraps its torso. A bronze helmet like a cage, like the jaws of some nightmare fish, conceals most of its head, but Mick can pick out great white eyes staring at him and Vin. What could be a sword, four feet of jagged scrimshaw and metal braided together, hangs from the figure's right hand. It pays no heed to the water churning around its knees.

I, for one, welcome our Atlantean overlords. The paraphrase of a line from an old episode of *The Simpsons* occurs to Mick without warning, almost causes him to laugh. There's no guarantee the figure is hostile, right? The armor, the weapon, could be for its protection, scouting an unknown location. Right?

In the middle distance beyond the… Atlantean, something large splashes through the water, moving closer. Hand-over-hand, Mick begins to pull himself up the hillside, toward the boat where his son waits for him. Because what else is there for him to do?

The Savage Angela in: The Beast in the Tunnels

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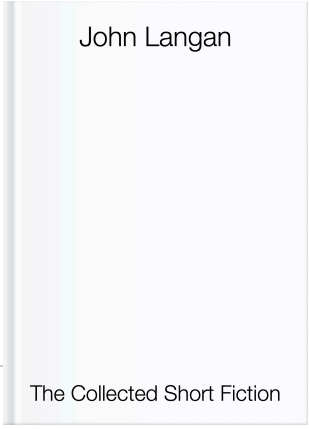

Her sword in a high guard (what the old woman who taught her to fight called the Horn of the Bull), Angela advances deeper into the tunnel. She steps lightly, but does not worry overly much about remaining silent. For one thing, the iron scales sewed to her leather tunic clink and rattle with her every movement. For another, the beast she is hunting appears able to hear the slightest sound. For a third, she wants the creature to know she is coming.

At least, she thinks she does. Magda, who began her training with a pair of hardwood sticks, used to ask her, “When are you most vulnerable in a fight?” It did not take long for her to demonstrate the answer: when you are attacking. Then you’ve committed yourself to whatever strike you are going to use against your opponent, and in so doing, exposed yourself to her counter—provided, that is, she is possessed of sufficient speed and knowledge. The lesson has served Angela well in more than one confrontation, and she has hopes it will once again. If she can provoke the beast to a charge, she will sidestep and bring her sword down on its skull.

As it so often does, her sword, *Deus ex Machina*, has an opinion on the matter. *Wouldn’t a trap be a more sensible plan?* She doesn’t hear its low, pleasant tones so much as she feels them, a tremor that starts in the weapon’s hilt and travels through the network of her bones to finish within her skull. Aside from its voice, and the intelligence behind it, there is nothing remarkable about the blade. It is a longsword, much as she trained with, its guard simple, its hilt wound in leather to improve the grip.

“A trap would be a fine idea,” she says. “What do you propose?”

A regiment of the King’s finest cavalry, the sword says, *armed with their longest and sharpest lances. They lie in wait while the beast is lured from*

hiding. Once it's in the open, they surround and skewer it.

"That might work. However, the process of organizing and implementing it would almost certainly expose Brum's joyweed enterprise, and the money it provides him, so I'd put the chances of his majesty embracing such a plan at zero."

Should you fail, he may have no choice.

"Should I fail, the matter will cease to concern me." She shifts her guard from right to left, tries to allow her shoulders, her arms, her wrists to remain limber.

You're becoming quite the philosopher.

"Hardly."

The tunnel has descended steeply, which has made Angela's progress slow, but also admitted enough sunlight to illuminate the passage. Now the ground levels, as the tunnel expands into a larger space. The cave's walls are honeycombed by a score of openings, each the approximate width of the one she's followed. It appears she's arrived at a hub for the beast's subterranean roadways. A few of the tunnels look recent, the entrances to them rough, rubble and earth scattered outside them. The remainder are considerably older, their thresholds worn smooth by years of use, the cave floor in front of them clear. Either the beast has been traveling these routes for a long time, or its family has before it.

Angela steps into the chamber. Its far side is difficult to see clearly, but there appears no trace of food, or scat, or treasure, any of the signs that she might have reached the creature's lair. She would prefer to meet it here, where the light is adequate and the distance to the surface is relatively short. If she ventures into another tunnel, she'll have to do so by torchlight, which will leave her one less hand for her sword, plus, there's no guarantee of her choosing the right passage. She could spend no small amount of time roaming underground, to no effect.

When she hears the sound to her left, she's almost happy. It comes from deep within one of the recent tunnels, a rumble and a clatter mixed with a metallic ring. With ferocious speed, it grows louder. As it does, the chamber floor vibrates underfoot. She hops back into the passage that brought her here, just as the beast crashes into view.

It brings with it a cloud of dust and dirt. She has the impression of sheets of metal, patches of dark fur. And size: the creature is at least as big as an elephant. It snorts and snuffles, wheeling around the center of the room. Angela switches her guard from left back to right.

Through the dust, she sees something like an enormous mole; although that's like calling a shark an enormous goldfish. The thing's forelimbs are tree trunks, capped with claws the length of her sword. Its eyes are almost comically tiny, but its snout flowers into a dozen thick, fleshy tentacles, each the length of her arm. Its hide is covered with thick, bristling fur—what is visible through the armor the creature wears. Its breast, back, and shoulders—its short legs—are covered by carefully fashioned bronze plates. Though battered and dim, the metal still bears traces of elaborate designs, looping figures and characters. *No one mentioned armor*, she thinks.

The appendages at the end of the beast's nose flick through the air, drawing the rest of its blunt head after them, back and forth. They stretch toward her, and she knows she's been found. The creature's bulk swings in her direction. She has enough time to realize she's in a bad position. If she's in the tunnel when the beast charges, it will crush her. Her plan of attack momentarily forgotten, she leaps out of the passage and to the right. The creature barrels past her into the tunnel. Its bulk stoppers what light the tunnel admitted, plunging the chamber into darkness.

"I think we might have to go with the cavalry, after all," Angela says.

Brum's description of the beast did make it sound a bit smaller, the sword says.

Already she can hear the thing at the other end of the passage, turning around. She would very much like to run someplace, anyplace, but there is no place to go. Any of the other tunnels will have the same disadvantage as the one she just escaped. Nor is she fast enough to outrun the creature in the open cavern. She raises the sword directly overhead, shifting her weight onto her back leg.

When the beast erupts from the passage, spilling light into the chamber, she lunges forward on her left leg, slashing down and to the right, in the strike Magda called the Tiger's Claw. She feels the tip of the sword slow for a fraction of a second, long enough for her to know it's met resistance, before

she sees red on the blade. The creature shrieks, spinning toward her, the tentacles that cap its snout thrashing. It rocks back on its haunches, readying another charge.

Before it moves, Angela does, the sword out to her right. The beast hesitates, which allows her to close the distance between them. By the time it registers her threat and starts to retreat, she's swept the sword up in a chop. The Heron's Wing severs one of the appendages flailing at the end of its nose.

Its last expression of pain was loud, but this one leaves her deafened, ears ringing. She ignores this, focused on attacking the rest of the tentacles, clearly a weakness. Her swings open wounds in half a dozen of them, spattering blood onto the cave floor. Screaming, the creature rises on its hind legs in a kind of crouch, lifting its wounded snout out of range and placing her within reach of its forelimbs and their great claws. The beast pendulums its left paw at her. She hops back, but has to use the sword to block attacks, first from the right, then from the returning left. The strength in the blows shudders the sword in her hands, threatens to knock it from her grasp.

She wants to retreat, move to a safer distance. Instead she slides closer, stabbing at the creature's forelimbs with the Scorpion's Sting. The beast yanks them away, straightening almost to standing, exposing the stretch of belly below its armored breast. She drives her sword in on the left and with a single smooth motion slices it across and out on the right. Blood vents over her as the beast's belly falls open, spilling the mass of its guts onto the cave floor in a bloody mess. She hops back, loses her footing in a puddle of blood, and is unable to avoid the paw rushing at her.

The impact flings her across the chamber. She thinks she might miss the wall, land in the tunnel beside it. She doesn't.

Dreams, Magda warned her, are no less perilous than waking life. The powers that hold sway over existence are at home in the shifting landscapes that sleep offers access to; indeed, there are some who contend that the powers are more comfortable in an environment that mimics their own mercurial natures. Not to mention, the dreamlands are host to a bestiary whose entries are as fearsome as anything Angela might expect to meet

while awake. For these reasons, it was important to go into sleep armed, and to remain so for the duration of her stay. This part of her training Angela found surprisingly easy. Magda said this was because she was already halfway to dreaming, especially when she ought to be focused on her lessons, but Angela thought the old woman was impressed with her. A few minutes' meditation, sometimes less, and she entered sleep, sword in hand. At first she equipped herself with the blade Magda kept on display in the hall, over the fireplace. When she obtained her own sword, she brought that. Within her dreams, *Deus ex Machina* has always felt surprisingly solid, which may be due to the fact that she was given it in a dream.

She has it with her now, in the fragmented world into which her collision with the cave wall has plunged her. The sword is silent, but it usually is on this side of waking. She is standing at the edge of King Brum's field of joyweed, surveying the devastation that has been visited upon it, the fencing knocked down, the plants torn up and trampled, the watering tank and the system of pipes leading to and from it smashed. Although the scene is lit as if by the sun, the sky is dark, clouded with stars. At the center of the ruined field, a tall woman wearing crimson robes considers a younger version of Angela. The woman's skin is the same as the sky overhead, as if she were a piece of it taken form. Stars flicker within her, a shooting star flares across her cheek. Her voice is pleasant, but it is cold, cold as a winter's night. "What would you have of me?" she says.

"Whatever you would give," the younger Angela says. The quilted jacket and pants she wore for her journey to this spot are torn, dyed with her blood and the blood of the things she slew on her climb here. She holds a bone saber she took from a creature whose face was an oversized, grinning mouth. The sword she carried when she set out on her quest broke halfway up the ziggurat whose summit was her destination, where she has found this woman, this power: the Pharaoh.

"What if I would give you nothing?" the Pharaoh says.

"I will take it," the younger Angela says.

"What if I would give you death?"

"I will take that too."

From within the folds of her robes, the woman withdraws a sword. Its blade appears to shimmer, as if liquid. Its hilt is gold, worked into the forms of snakes that appear to coil around one another. She holds it up for the younger Angela to admire. “This,” she says, “was one of my enemies. When I overcame him, I remade him in the heart of a dead star, thus. I renamed him, as well: *Deus ex Machina*.”

“I don’t understand what that means,” the younger Angela says.

“It is a private joke, in the tongue of an ancient land that also borders the dreamlands. Accept this blade from me, and you are of my house, now and forever.”

The younger Angela drops the bone sword and kneels, bowing her head and raising her hands, palms up. (She will awaken a long distance from the place where she lay down to search for the ziggurat in her dreams, her armor still in tatters, likewise the flesh beneath it, a plain longsword by her side.)

The Pharaoh vanishes. In her place stands Magda. She is dressed for instruction, in a tunic and trousers of coarse cloth, plain boots, her gray hair tied back. Her arms are clasped behind her. Her lips do not move. Instead her voice rises from the ravaged earth. “To treat with any of the powers,” she says, “is to court damnation. Those who seek their notice find it either in torment that carries on until long after the stars have dwindled to cinders, or in service that endures longer still. For neither is there the oblivion that is the balm of our suffering lives. Each forfeits that reward.”

Angela’s younger self maintains her position.

There is a time when she is walking, stumbling really, through a dark space, lit here and there by smears of furry moss that emit a pale green light. Her thoughts refuse to cohere for any meaningful amount of time. This may be due to the pain that stabs her head, her neck, her back, with every movement. It may be due to the ringing that keeps all other sounds at a distance from her ears. It may be due to the smell that clouds her nostrils and coats her tongue, the copper odor of blood and the earthy stench of shit.

But she has her sword, out in front of her in the guard called the Horn of the Rhino, and, though she cannot make sense of what the weapon is saying, she finds its tones soothing.

Light dances ahead of her—a torch, jammed into a crevice in the side of the tunnel she is moving through. Its smoky glow shines in the trail of gore at her feet, torn loops of intestine, bloody chunks of flesh and fur. As she approaches the torch, her mind begins to gather itself. She is tracking Brum's monster; though there's scant skill involved in following the creature's lifeblood smeared on the floor. Mortally wounded, the beast has retreated to its lair. Should she find it living, it may be more dangerous still, made reckless by its impending end.

You could wait, her sword says. *It can't have much longer to live.*

She shakes her head, wincing at the pain the motion sparks. "I'm not certain how much time I have before my injuries must be answered. Best to finish this quickly."

On the other side of the torch, the passage feeds into a cave the size of a decent barn. Several more torches have been wedged into cracks in the walls. By their light she sees the creature, on its left side, its entrails a torn and bloody tail. It is dead. Relief pours over her, causes her to lower the sword.

"Is this your handiwork?" The voice is bright and clear as a horn sounded in a forest. The woman to whom it belongs steps from behind the beast's head. She is tall, easily two heads above Angela, and her bronze skin is roped with muscle. Her tunic is the hide of something whose fur mixes with scales. Her long hair is braided with the teeth and claws of more animals than Angela can identify. In her right hand the woman holds a spear whose polished wooden haft ends in an equally polished blade. Her presence fills the chamber; she is the most vital, the most real thing in it. Angela knows her for a power, and acknowledges her question.

"It is."

"This was the Lord of Those Who Dig Beneath the Soil," the woman says. "His worshippers dwelled in cities built far underground. Upon occasion, he and I hunted together for the great worms that plagued his people. When their time passed, he remained, old and alone. I thought to hunt him myself, and end his solitude." She allows the tip of her spear to drop, catching the shaft in her left hand. "I suspect your motives are not so pure."

Angela is aware of the woman appraising her, the way a hunter might size up a lion she intends to slay. She squares her stance, lifts *Deus ex Machina* in a high guard. The sword twists in her hands, as if eager for the woman's attack.

At the sight of the blade, the woman's eyes widen. The point of the spear wavers. "What," she says, "are you doing with *that*?"

"It is mine," Angela says. "I received it from the hand of her called the Pharaoh, when she took me into her house."

The woman pulls her spear up. "If you carry that weapon, then your doom is upon you already. It would be a mercy to spare you it with a thrust to the heart. For the sake of him you have slain, I refuse you that charity."

Without another look at Angela or the remains of the great creature, the woman walks out of the cave. Angela gives her a wide berth, but keeps the sword pointed at her. It strains in her grip, like a dog struggling to be off its leash. She forces it to remain in position until it settles.

Once the woman is gone, Angela approaches the beast's carcass. Its fur is clotted with mud and blood. Its mouth is open, showing yellow teeth the size of shields. The claws of its right paw drape its breastplate; the claws of its left splay on the cave floor. Angela considers the creature's armor. Its edges are bordered by lines that cross and loop and twist like paths on a map. Its surface is embossed with figures that suggest moles and voles and other animals that dwell underground, engaged in some complex action, a dance perhaps, or a celebration—maybe a battle. Whatever it represents, like so much else, is now lost.

Angela circles to the creature's back. The agreement she has with Brum specifies she bring him the beast's head. She raises her sword. She tries for a single blow, but the task requires a second.

The Supplement

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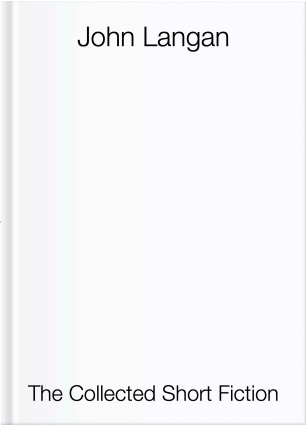

I hadn't seen Minerva Baker for six months, since she'd taken an early retirement that left the rest of the library's senior staff several shades of green. At the time of her departure from SUNY Huguenot's Harriet Jacobs Library, our head librarian had been a tall, heavyset woman whose brown hair, regularly dyed and styled, and fine, caramel features, carefully made up, gave the impression she had only recently crossed the threshold into middle age, rather than advanced almost to its other side. The illusion was strengthened by the manner of her dress, current while avoiding the trendy, and the matter of her conversation, serious and informed by her morning's read of the *New York Times*. That there had been tragedy in her life was an open secret: an only child, a daughter, dead at fifteen of a heroin overdose in the bathroom of Huguenot High, and a husband who had left the following year, for the therapist they had been meeting. Minerva didn't speak of any of it to us, however, so neither did we to her. In the month before her departure, she softened slightly, sharing with us her intention to spend her looming free time first on a trip to the Jersey shore, then on catching up with some reading. Her farewell dinner was a bland, pleasant hour and a half, where those of us who had worked beside and under her stood to offer generic tributes and toasts to her.

And that was that, until I saw her in the produce section of the local Shop-Rite, fumbling over a display of plums, lifting one for inspection with a trembling hand. Immediately, I knew who she was, even as I was thinking, *There's no way*. Had twenty, thirty years elapsed since our last contact, I might have believed the woman hunched in front of me was the same one who had been my boss for the better part of five years. Wrinkled, liver spotted, the skin hung loose on her arms, about her neck. Beneath a dingy Mets cap, her hair was white, wild. A pair of thick reading glasses balanced on the end of her nose. Her lower jaw jutted forward, pushing her lips up

and out in a way that reminded me of my grandfather, in the latter stages of his dementia. Everything about her suggested a collapse of catastrophic dimensions, Alzheimer's of terrifyingly fast onset, or a major stroke, or a devastating injury. Gone were her fashionable clothes, replaced by a sleeveless blue dress speckled with the remnants of recent meals. A clear plastic bag looped around her left wrist contained a wallet and a set of keys. As she was struggling to hold, and dropping, the plum, the urge to flee, to separate myself from this person and whatever calamity had enfolded her, seized me. I might have succumbed to it, had one of the supermarket's employees not coughed and said, "Excuse me," at my back, so that he could push a cart stacked with yogurt past me. I stepped aside, recovered myself, and walked over to my former boss and said, "Uh, Minerva?"

At the sound of her name, she turned her head toward me. The grooves in her skin seemed to cut all the way to the bone. Her right cheek was a forest of skin tags. The whites of her eyes were yellowed, the pupils cloudy. Her jaw worked, and I wondered if her affliction had taken her identity from her, too, if she was here as part of a group from one of the local care facilities. In a voice that had aged as much as the rest of her, she said, "Sam."

The pleased surprise with which she pronounced my name made it clear that she recognized me. Her follow-up questions, "How have you been? How are things at the library? How's Hideki doing? Is he running you ragged?" confirmed that her mind remained intact.

"Good," I said. "I'm good. We're good. Hideki's… coming along."

She laughed. "Ever the diplomat."

"What about you?" I said. "How have you been?"

"You mean, What the hell happened to you, don't you?"

"Have you been sick? I meant to keep in touch, but…"

"It isn't as if we were all that close to begin with," Minerva said. "It's fine. I have not been sick, not really. What I have been is busy."

"That's good."

"Maybe it is and maybe it isn't. What I've been engaged in has taken its toll on me, to the extent that, frankly, I'm surprised you knew who I was."

“You don’t look that different.”

“Yes I do. It’s kind of you to say, but I can still see myself in the mirror.”

“Okay,” I said, “so what the hell have you been busy with?”

“A book.”

“A book? What—like, restoring one?”

She shook her head. “If you can hang around for a couple of minutes while I pick up a few things, then run me back to my apartment, I’ll show you what I’ve been up to.”

My wife was teaching her graduate class, which meant there was no need for me to rush home. Not to mention, my curiosity had been raised, as well as pity at the image of Minerva in her diminished state, alone in her apartment. “Sure,” I said.

I trailed after her as she filled her basket with the scant necessities of her daily life. Our talk continued, though it focused on me. Yes, Alexa was well. Yes, we had talked about trying for a baby a second time. No, we hadn’t done anything about it. “Yet,” I added.

“Give it time,” Minerva said. “You’re young.”

Her shopping concluded, mine forgotten, I drove Minerva to the other side of Huguenot, to her modest apartment in the Riverview Arms. While she stored her groceries, I inspected the photographs on her living room walls. Here were Minerva’s graduation portraits from high school, college, and graduate school, each surrounded by smaller photos of her, in her robes, flanked by an older man and woman I assumed were her parents, and assorted other people I took for aunts, uncles, cousins. There were pictures of her in a number of foreign cities, London, Paris, and Prague, and seaside shots that could have been taken anywhere. There were more photos of her at work than I would have expected, including a couple in which I identified myself. I was not surprised to find no pictures of her wedding, but I was struck by the lack of any photos of her daughter. Perhaps the memory was too painful, or perhaps she kept those pictures in a more private place, her bedroom or study.

“All right,” Minerva said from the kitchen doorway. “I would offer you a beer, but I haven’t got any. Would you like a Coke?”

“I’m fine, thanks,” I said. “Don’t let that stop you.”

“It won’t.” She returned to the kitchen. I heard a cupboard door squeak open, the clink of glass, the *pock* of a bottle being unstoppered. She reappeared holding a tumbler a little less than half full of a dark, honey-tinted liquid. She deposited the glass on an end table beside a recliner. “Make yourself comfortable,” she said, waving her hand at the short couch. “I’ll be right back.” She exited the room down a corridor that led, I presumed, to the bath- and bedrooms. A doorknob clicked, hinges squealed. A moment later, she shuffled back into the living room.

As she did so, some trick of the light made it appear as if there were momentarily two of her, as if her reflection had escaped the mirror and was walking beside her. I shut my eyes, shook my head. When I looked again, I saw one Minerva, carrying a large, framed photograph in one hand and a slender, leather-bound book in the other. She crossed to me and held out the picture, which I took. “My Yvonne,” she said. She made her way to the easy chair, into which she lowered herself carefully. Safely seated, she placed the book in her lap and reached for the tumbler.

The photo she’d handed me was a portrait of a teenage girl, the head-and-shoulder shot offered every fall by most schools. Its background, blurry, showed trees in autumn yellow, orange, and red. Yvonne Baker smiled ruefully at the camera, her teeth fenced by braces, her eyes shrunk by a pair of thick, round glasses. A rash of pimples spread across her forehead. Her hair, black, curly, was cut in a bob whose lower ends flared out and away from her chin. She was wearing a blouse whose broad, white and peach stripes made it appear wider than it was. I thought of my own, equally disastrous high school pictures, the look of long-suffering regret I’d worn for them. “She’s lovely,” I said, rising to pass the portrait back to Minerva.

“Thank you,” she said. She placed it face-up on her end table. “She didn’t think so—said she was hideous, a freak. I never took her seriously. That’s what every fifteen-year-old girl says, right?”

“And boy.”

Minerva nodded. “I trotted out the same clichés my mom had used on me. Ugly ducklings turn into beautiful swans, I said. Just you wait. Anyway, it’s what’s on the inside that counts. None of that had worked for me; I don’t

know why I imagined it would for her. We offer these platitudes because we're afraid of admitting the truth. This is a horrible time. People will be more cruel to you now than they ever have been before or are likely to be again. There's little you can do except endure. All I can offer is my love, which I'm afraid isn't enough."

She sighed. "I'm not sure how she got into heroin. I assume the why was to fit in, and for the relief it offered. I don't know who introduced her to it, when she started using, how she afforded it. I didn't pick up on any of the warning signs. How is any of that possible, right? That was what my ex-husband kept saying. 'How could you not have known?' You, not we. She was found in the girls' bathroom, the week before Valentine's Day, unresponsive. The ambulance was called; they rushed her across the river, to Penrose. She was put on life support, but there was no brain activity. We waited a couple of days, and then we—*I* made the decision to let her go."

"I'm very sorry," I said.

"Thank you," she said. "After that, everything fell apart. My marriage broke up, and most of our friends went with my ex. His cutthroat lawyer was better than my cutthroat lawyer, so when the house was sold, our assets divvied up, he came out ahead. I'd like to say I didn't care, but I did. I was angry at the way he had made Yvonne's death my fault, her and him collateral damage from my professional ambitions. Can you believe that? When he and his lawyer outmaneuvered me and my lawyer, it was—I knew he would present it as proof that his version of events was true, a kind of updated trial-by-combat. Which was ridiculous, of course, except that the majority of our friends took it that way, too. I guess I did, a little. Or—I was nervous it was true.

"I did not want to be one of those people who are defined by their tragedies. I didn't want the first thing anyone said about me to be, 'Oh, Minerva Baker, she lost her daughter to drugs,' or, 'Her husband ran off with a younger woman.' I threw myself into my work. I lobbied for more funding for the library, expanded the science catalogue, upgraded the film and video holdings. I convinced Veronica Croydon to donate her late husband's collection of Victorian books and artifacts to us. I scheduled lectures, book groups, film screenings. At the risk of sounding immodest, I

made the Jacobs Library the premiere university library in the Mid-Hudson Valley."

"Yes, you did," I said.

"It wasn't enough, though. In the end, no matter how much I accomplished during my time in charge of the library, it was a case of the Herbert Coleman room."

"The what-room?"

"Herbert Coleman. It's in the old library building, over by Old Main. Last time I checked, Photography was using it as a darkroom. Herbert Coleman was provost of the college when it was still a teachers' school. After he died, at the age of 104, the room was dedicated to his memory. I had noticed the nameplate beside the door, so I researched it, even found a copy of the dedication speech. The room, it said, would serve as a reminder of the provost's relationship to the school. Every time students saw Coleman's name, they would think on him, and his memory would endure.

"Except it didn't. Nor is he unique. The Huguenot campus is littered with plaques dedicating this tree, that bench, this room, that building, to the memory of former students, faculty, administrators. The only name anyone can tell you anything about is Harriet Jacobs, and that's because she was a writer. The others… you understand they meant something to somebody, but that's about it. Only the sentiment survives. A tree might be planted for me, a classroom designated the Minerva Baker room, but in the end, I would suffer the same fate as the former provost.

"Had Yvonne been alive, I doubt any of this would have mattered as much, if at all. The adage about your child being a kind of immortality is true enough. But she wasn't alive. What remained of my daughter was her death, the space she'd left in the world."

Minerva lifted the tumbler and tasted its contents. "Well," she said, "I guess that was a bit more than you were expecting."

I didn't know what to say.

"A bit more, and a bit less." She drank from her glass a second time. "None of this explains the reason I look the way I do; although you might call it the context. The immediate cause of my decline lies in here," she said, and

patted the book in her lap. Beyond noticing that it was oversized, the dimensions of a magazine rather than a hardcover, and bound in leather the soft color of butter, I hadn't paid much attention to it. When the palm of Minerva's hand touched the cover, for the slightest of instants, I would have sworn she vanished, that instead of her seated in the chair, there was a blank within her silhouette. So quickly was she there again, however, that I discounted what I had seen as a perceptual glitch. She said, "The fellow who told me about it called it the Supplement."

"What is it?"

"He wasn't the one who gave it to me. No, that was somebody else—George Farange was his name. You wouldn't have known it to look at him, but he was old. Much older than I am—than I've become. He wore his years easily, as comfortably as the navy suit he had on when he showed up at the door to my office. This was maybe six weeks before I retired. This man appeared at the front desk asking to view a manuscript from the Croydon collection. Lucille sent him to talk to me. He was a pencil sketch of a fellow, the lines of his cheeks, his jaw, his forehead, somehow faint, as if he weren't all the way *there*. The only part of him that was present were his eyes. They were pale, almost no real color to speak of, but they burned in the sockets. If he was a sketch, then the eyes were holes poked in the paper, a blowtorch shining through them. Everything else—the expensive suit and shoes, the neatly trimmed Vandyke, the hair slicked back against his skull—was decoration.

"He had come, George Farange said, because news had reached his ears—that was how he talked, *Word has reached my ears*—that the late Professor Croydon had succeeded in obtaining a letter that the writer, Wilkie Collins, had written to his friend, the writer, Charles Dickens, about a visit to the Parisian catacombs. I couldn't imagine how this man had come by his information. Most of the Croydon collection was still in boxes in one of the conference rooms, awaiting cataloging. Had Mr. Farange known Roger Croydon? I asked.

"The pleasure had been denied him, he said. He had not learned of the letter's location until after the professor's untimely end, which was a shame, because he would have relished the opportunity to call on the man

in his fascinating home. (Roger Croydon lived in that big place on Founders, the Belvedere House.)

"I still wasn't clear how the man knew about this document. Nor was I sure why it mattered. Assuming I agreed to search for the letter, and assuming I found it and allowed him to look at it, I wasn't about to let him walk out of the library with it. If he tried to take it from me, I outweighed him by at least fifty pounds. Thin—insubstantial as he was, I figured one punch and he'd vanish in a puff of dust. I had a pretty good idea where the piece was, and it wasn't as if I had much else to do: Hideki had already assumed most of my day-to-day duties. I couldn't promise anything, I said, but I would have a look. Farange thanked me.

"As I'd thought it would be, the letter was in the second of four boxes of rare manuscripts and correspondence. It was toward the front: six sheets of paper held in a clear plastic sleeve. There was handwriting on eleven of the twelve sides, tall, careful script, easy to read. I eased the pages from their cover and spread them on one of the room's tables. I was pretty pleased with myself. I returned to my office, and fetched George Farange.

"The sight of the pages impressed him far less than I would have predicted. Hands in his trouser pockets, he strolled over to the table as if he were browsing a display of old flyers. He didn't lean closer to inspect the letter, the way a scholar (or a collector) might. To be honest, he didn't look as if he was paying much attention to them at all. When he turned around, he had a book in his right hand, this book," Minerva nodded at the volume on her lap. "I would have sworn on a stack of Bibles he hadn't carried it into the room with him. He said, 'I wonder if I might impose on you to examine this for me.'

"Right away, I was certain I'd understood his game. When I opened the book, I would find a stack of bills tucked inside the front cover. I would say something like, 'I'll need to examine this in my office,' step out of the room, and return to find the table empty. I'd give the book back to Farange, he would leave, and that would be that. Maybe we would do this again, should he learn of another rarity in the library's possession.

"Of course I wasn't going to accept his bribe. I was curious, though, to learn what the going rate was. I took the book. Already, I was looking

forward to the expression on his face when I rejected his offer. Holding the book in my left hand, I used my right index finger to turn the cover," she mimed the action, "to heighten the drama.

"There was no money. In fact, there wasn't anything in the book: its pages were blank. I would have said it was no different from the journals you can buy at any bookstore or stationery shop, except that it had the feel of a much older volume. The cover was smooth with age. The pages were soft, almost oily; I thought they might be vellum. As I turned them, little clouds of cedary dust rose into the air. I went through every last page, but the book was empty. I looked at George Farange and said, 'I don't understand. What is it I'm supposed to be examining?' I held the volume out to him.

"'Would you mind having another look at it?' he asked. It was his experience that, as a reader might need to accustom himself to a particular text, so a particular text might need to accustom itself to a reader.

"Had I missed something? I didn't suppose Farange would try bribing me via personal check, but I was new to this world. I opened the book. I lingered on each page, making sure that it wasn't stuck to the next one. Whatever material they were, it was softer, *spongier* than vellum. At the end, though, the book still contained neither text nor money. I was starting to wonder if George Farange and his blank book were a prank, some manner of farewell-tomfoolery cooked up by Hideki; although the point of it was lost on me. As far as strippers went, this fellow was about the last man you would have chosen for the job. I raised my eyes from the book—

"—and Yvonne was standing in front of me, just as real and alive as you are to me and I to you. She was wearing an oversized tie-dyed T-shirt and a pair of new jeans—one of the outfits, I realized, her father and I had bought her when she completed her stay in rehab. Yes, rehab. Instead of overdosing, the girl before me had walked into her guidance counselor's office, dumped the contents of her purse on that woman's desk, and declared herself in need of help. I give Ms. Bowen credit. She didn't panic, didn't rush to call either the school's resource officer or me and Yvonne's father. She left the mess on her desk untouched. She spent the next three hours talking with Yvonne, until my daughter felt ready to phone me and her dad. I *remembered* that call, remembered the shock that had poured through me like cold water, the crumpling sensation in my middle, as if my

insides were made of tin foil and an enormous hand was crushing them. When I went to back my car out of its spot, I put it in drive and leapt the barrier, scraped the undercarriage. I met Yvonne's father at the school entrance, and he was that furious way he got when he was truly afraid. We joined hands, and entered the school for a meeting with Yvonne and the guidance counselor that ended with her father and I driving her across the river to Penrose, to check her into their residential rehab unit. The next month was full of meetings for Yvonne's father and me: with the case worker supervising her treatment, with a support group for family members of addicts, with Yvonne's guidance counselor, and with my daughter, herself, with and without her case worker. The meetings continued after we took her home; in fact, that was what she and I were talking about, changing the time of her next therapy appointment to allow her to try out for spring track.

"Not only was my daughter talking to me, she was doing so in the kitchen of the house her father and I had sold as part of our divorce. I loved that house. It had big rooms with high ceilings, which made it a pain to heat, but I didn't care. The kitchen ran the back of the house, and ended in a window nook where Yvonne used to sit and read when she was younger. The house was one of a pair that had been built, side by side, after the Civil War by a man who made his fortune in the railroad. He lived in our house, and his twin brother lived in the house next door, until they had a falling out, and never spoke again. I could tell you all sorts of thing about that place. Once a researcher, always a researcher, I suppose. The point is, there we were, in the kitchen with its long counters, and there was Yvonne's father, too, at the stove, sautéing a pan of onions and spices for the chili he threw together every couple of weeks. The sight of him in his sweater and jeans and the DON'T MAKE ME POISON YOUR FOOD apron he wore was almost as much a surprise as seeing Yvonne. But it made sense: she hadn't died, so none of the awful consequences of that most awful event had occurred. We were still a family, living in our home.

"I was stunned. I was about to cry with joy. I was horrified. Yes, horrified. After someone dies—after someone that close to you, that much a part of you, dies, it takes years to accept their death, to adjust to their absence. Is it Freud who talks about the work of mourning? It is work, a process whereby

you move your loved one from the land of the living to the land of the dead, from *is* to *was*. To have them back after all that time, all that effort, wrenches you. Not to mention, you're immediately terrified you're going to lose them again.

"Which I did, when I dropped the book. It thumped on the carpet, and I was back in the conference room. Everything grew dark; I was afraid I was going to faint. I reached out my right hand to the table, to steady myself, and saw its surface bare, the letter gone. As was George Farange. I took a seat. The book lay open on the floor. I leaned down for it. I glanced at the pages, still blank. How had he—

"—and there was Yvonne in her tie-dyed T-shirt and jeans, in the kitchen of the old house, her father pouring the first can of beans into the frying pan. Well, she wanted to know, what did I think about rescheduling her appointment?

"This time, I slapped the book shut, and was in the library. I started to shiver, in that uncontrollable way you do when the flu is coming over you. Had Farange slipped me some kind of drug? I recalled the dust that had lifted from the book's pages as I turned them. Could it have been a hallucinogen? The idea seemed ridiculous, but considering what I'd just experienced—twice—maybe not. Thing was, I'd dabbled with magic mushrooms during my student days, and while time had dimmed the memory somewhat, my encounter with Yvonne had been substantially different from tripping… more definite, the edges sharper.

"But no matter what Farange had done to me, Wilkie Collins's letter was missing, a not-insignificant part of a legacy for whose integrity I was ultimately responsible, even if I was behind in cataloging its contents—which I had planned to complete my last couple of weeks before retirement, a pleasant way to pass my final hours at work. In fact, I had yet to record any of the contents of the box which had held the letter.

"Like that, the solution to my dilemma presented itself. Yes, Veronica Croydon had included printed lists of the contents of each box of her husband's papers, but we could only be accountable for what was there when we composed our official record. If a document she listed wasn't present, well, maybe she'd made a mistake. It was entirely possible: there

were a lot of materials in those boxes. The likelihood of her poring over the library's breakdown of her husband's effects was slim to none. After all, if she'd been that concerned about them in the first place, the woman wouldn't have donated Roger Croydon's papers to us, would she?

"Yes, I known how all this sounds. I could have gone to the dean and explained to her what had happened, and her first question would have been, Was I all right? After which, she would have called the campus police, told them I had been the victim of a possible assault, during which important documents had been stolen. No doubt the local papers would find out. That prospect, of my being a victim—a dupe—was not one I welcomed. I did not want my remaining time at the job at which I had excelled to be shadowed by failure, as if by a sign that my departure from the position was happening in the nick of time, if not slightly past it. Vanity, yes, to which, I suppose I would have told you, I was entitled.

"What I really wanted, though, was the chance to spend more time with George Farange's blank book. By the time I had finished putting away the Croydon boxes, it was late enough in the day for me to leave without raising any eyebrows. I drove straight home, made a quick bite to eat, and settled down to find out if the book retained its strange power.

"It did. I turned a couple of its pages, and there was my daughter, right hand on her hip, head tilted to the left, a look on her face like she'd just tasted a piece of fruit that was slightly rotten. It was her, 'Mother, I'm *waiting*,' pose. Here—wherever this was, this past that hadn't been—Yvonne was listening for my answer to her spring track question. Her father was stirring the beans he'd added to the frying pan. I opened my mouth and said, 'I think we can manage that. What does your father have to say?'

"'He said to ask you,' Yvonne said, which made me think, *Typical*, but which also made my heart jump. I had talked to my daughter, and she had responded. However small it was, we had had an interaction. While Yvonne's father continued to add more kinds of beans and a can of tomatoes to his chili, my conversation with her continued. Did she have any idea what events she might want to try out for? Sprints? Distance running? The hurdles? Long jump? Sprinting, she said, she was the fastest in her gym class. Yvonne had never been what you would call competitive. Was she prepared to race against girls from another school and try to beat them?

‘Geez, Mom,’ she said, ‘when did you become one of those sports parents?’ ‘Yeah,’ her father called, ‘if she wants to run, let her run.’ I wasn’t stopping her from running, I said, I simply wanted to be sure she understood what the coaches would be expecting of her, that was all.

“It’s funny. After someone is gone, you think, ‘If only I could speak to them one last time, I would say all the things I never said, never said enough, while they were here.’ I had a litany of such statements, from the big, ‘I love you,’ to the small, ‘On my desk at work, there’s a picture of you in the waves at Myrtle Beach. You were five, wearing that green bathing suit with the orange fish on it that you said made you a fish princess. Every time I look at that photo, no matter how bad a day I’m having, I smile.’ Yet here I was, granted that extra conversation, or something close enough to it, and already, I had fallen into the habits of a decade and a half gone by. Throughout our exchange, I had not ceased feeling George Farange’s book, resting on my lap. I closed it, and brought myself back to my apartment.

“I had to locate Farange and speak to him, maybe pay him a visit. I spent the next day sequestered in my office, tracking him down. It took some doing, but I found him on the High Street in Edinburgh, in Scotland. That ruled out a face-to-face encounter, but his phone number was listed. I wrote it down and then… nothing. I didn’t touch the book, which I placed on the desk in the guest room, and I didn’t call George Farange. I took no action, but it was one of those cases where not acting is a deliberate choice. What I was waiting for, I’m not certain; although it may have been my last day at the library. Were I to open the book again, I knew I would find it more difficult to shut, and I didn’t want that to interfere with my job. Actually, it was more that I didn’t want work to interfere with the experience of the book.

“The night my retirement began, after a celebratory dinner at Pesce, I went into the guest room and retrieved the blank book. I lay down on my bed with it, and did not leave either bed or book for the next several hours. During that time, I sat with Yvonne on the living room couch in my old house and watched the second half of *The Aristocats* on TV. She loved that movie, had ever since she was a little thing. We watched the cats outsmart the baddies, while the air filled with the smell of Yvonne’s father’s chili, cumin and garlic and tomato, and when the credits were rolling, we went

into the kitchen and ate chili and cornbread for dinner. Between bites, Yvonne said that the film always made her want to visit Paris. Well, her father said, maybe we should, and suddenly, we were planning a vacation to France for the following summer.

"It was all so *ordinary*. We could have been one of a million different families, going through their nightly routine. No muss, no fuss. Only, once all that has been lost to you, the mundane becomes fantastical, a kind of lost oasis of happiness and tranquility. Throughout the evening, I struggled not to burst into tears at the sheer quietness of everything. Yvonne did her homework, went up to bed. Her father retired not long after. I sat up to watch the late news and one of the late-night talk shows. Once the talk show was over, I climbed the stairs to Yvonne's room. Her door was open. I peered inside. She was asleep, snoring softly. I tiptoed into her room, slid the chair out from her desk, and lowered myself onto it. Much the way I had when she was a baby, I watched her breathe, as sleep crept over me.

"I came to with a start, unsure where I was. My room, the bedroom I'd laid my head down in for the last twelve years, looked strange, unfamiliar, as if I'd emerged into a dream. I sat up, and noticed the book sprawled on the floor, where it had landed when it slipped from my lap. The sight of it brought me back to… my senses, I suppose. My head was splitting, and I was exhausted to the point of nausea. I fetched a glass of water and a couple of ibuprofen, and climbed back into bed.

"The next morning, I didn't feel much better. *It figures*, I thought. *First day of my retirement, and I come down with the flu*. However, being sick gave me an excuse to spend more time with George Farange's book, if I needed one. I breakfasted on weak tea and dry toast, and returned to those empty pages. I won't bore you with a recitation of that session's events; suffice it to say, they were incredibly unexciting. As were those of the next day's session, and the one after that, and so on, until a week had slipped by and I hadn't stirred from my bed any more than was absolutely necessary. Despite the extensive bed rest, my sickness hadn't improved; although I wasn't especially concerned. A good flu can knock you down for ten days, two weeks, even. What concerned me was glancing into the bathroom mirror that seventh morning and seeing the streak of white in my hair. This wasn't the color treatment I used starting to lose its hold; this was my hair bleached

white. You might have said it lent me a stylish appearance. But the texture was wrong, fibrous, the way I remembered my grandmother's hair feeling. It could have been some fluke of the last product I'd used, but I knew in my gut that it was a direct consequence of the last week with the book. I had a strong suspicion my illness was connected to it, too.

"I didn't waste any time. I located George Farange's number and placed the call to the UK.

"A different man answered the phone. He sounded younger, substantially. He spoke with an American accent, from somewhere in our neck of the woods, I'd guess. No, he said, Mr. Farange wasn't in. He was away on business; the young man couldn't say when he would return. Perhaps he could be of assistance. What was I calling in regard to?

"A book, I said. Mr. Farange had given me a book to examine, and I wanted to speak to him about it.

"What kind of book?

"It was about the size of a magazine, I told him. Bound in leather. Thirty sheets of what I thought was vellum. I estimated it as late eighteenth century, but wasn't certain. That I could detect, the cover, the pages, were devoid of any text.

"He drew in a breath, said something like, So you're the one. Then he said, 'What has it done to you?'

"From the tone of his voice, I knew what he was asking. I said I'd been sick, with what I'd assumed was the flu. Now my hair was going white.

"The book was called the Supplement, the young man said. It was also known as Odin's Eye.

"What is it? I said.

"For an answer, he told a story. There is a city, he said, that stands on the shore of a black ocean. It is old, and it has many neighborhoods. In one of these, there is a church. It's not much to look at; a long, low building whose walls are cracked and whose front door doesn't lock the way it should. Anything of value inside, sculptures by famous artists, sacred vessels fashioned of gold, relics of saints long-dead, has long since been moved to a more secure location, or stolen. If you walk up the center aisle to the altar,

however, and circle it to the right, you will find a doorway in the rear wall. It's barred by a heavy gate whose lock is in perfect working order. Should you happen to have in your possession the key to that lock, and should you also know a certain sequence of words to utter while fitting and turning the key, you will find yourself at the top of a flight of stone stairs. They descend a considerable distance. At their foot, you will enter a corridor that leads to a large, heavy door, also locked. If you have come this far, then it's likely you'll have the key to this lock, too, and know the proper words to speak as you insert and twist the key. When you open the door, you will confront what appears to be a wall of white material, plaster, perhaps. Touch it, though, and you will feel it soft, warm, almost oily. It glows with a white radiance that overwhelms whatever light you have employed thus far. It is alive—or rather, it's part of something alive. Call it an eye, but such an eye as never was. Do you know the myth of Odin's right eye? He plucked it from the socket in order to gain a draught from the well of Mimir the wise. After Mimir took it, he dropped the eye into the waters of his well. Imagine the eye of a god, floating in dark water. Imagine an eye vast as a cathedral, an organ that can take in the reaches of the galaxy, of galaxies far beyond. Imagine an eye that can view what was, what is, and what will be, as well as what was not, is not, and will not be, that can apprehend all contingencies simultaneously.

"Now, the young man said, suppose you have brought to this aperture a knife of surpassing sharpness. With such a blade, you might shave from the surface of this great eye the thinnest of sheets. Who knows how many you could peel away? Later, after you have returned to your chambers, you might assemble these sheets into a book, bind them between leather covers. This book would allow its reader to participate in what the eye surveys; though to the reader, unaccustomed to the eye's perspective, it would seem as if they were living within that vision. Some might seek the answers to exotic mysteries. Some might venture through time and space. Some might pursue more modest goals, might search out lives in which they had been spared certain tragedies, the untimely death of a loved one, a missed opportunity in love. Rare indeed would be the man or woman who could turn the pages of such a volume and not be drawn out of themselves, into another vista.

“But why the sickness? I asked. Why the white hair?

“Divorced from their host, the young man said, the book’s pages required another source of power.

“Me, I said.

“If I were to put the volume aside, never open its cover again, then the likelihood was that I would recover in short order. The white patch in my hair would grow out. If I returned to the Supplement, however, I could expect my condition to worsen. The young man had not heard of anyone lasting more than a year with the book, and if he was to be candid, most were consumed by it in half, a quarter that time.

“Why had George Farange given it to me? What had I done to him or his?

“A trade, the young man said. He assumed Mr. Farange took something from me.

“There was a letter he was interested in… But what the hell kind of trade was that? I had no idea what I was taking from him.

“He wasn’t saying it was a fair trade, the young man said. Anyway, would I have believed Farange if he had told me what the book was and what it did?

“It was a fair enough point. I asked what was supposed to happen next.

“Nothing, he said. I had the Supplement. I was free to do with it as I chose.

“He and his friend didn’t want it back?

“They would have the book in due time, he said.”

Minerva raised her glass and finished its contents. “As you can see, I returned to the book—to Yvonne, to the life we hadn’t lived. I would like to make it out as a dramatic choice, but it was more something I fell back into. Oh, I steered clear of it for a good couple of weeks, took that trip to Cape May I’d promised myself, sat on the beach and caught up on my reading, ate at some very nice restaurants. And all the time, I kept thinking, *I wish Yvonne were here: she’d love this*. It wasn’t exactly a new thought, but my experience with the Supplement lent it a weight it hadn’t had for years. I’ve always loved the ocean, always found sitting beside it restorative. Watching the waves roll onto the shore by myself, though, hurt. After I returned here, I decided to open the book for a few minutes, just long enough to check on my daughter. Already, I was wondering if I could maybe look at it every

now and again, once a month, or once a week. That wouldn't be so bad, would it? Spread out its effects over years, decades, even.

"What was supposed to be a quick visit turned into a much longer stay, almost two days. Something strange happened to the passage of time in the other place: almost a full week went by. There, we had rescheduled Yvonne's therapy appointment to allow her to try out for spring track. She made the team. Her father and I took her out for a celebratory dinner at the Plaza Diner.

"When I emerged from this session, it was to more white hair on my reflection, some serious lines on my forehead, alongside my mouth. The flu feeling was back, bad as ever. I can't say my appearance didn't make me jump, but the surprise didn't last long. I cleaned up, ate a good meal, and went back to the Supplement, to what I had started thinking of as my *real* life.

"I watched my daughter win races. I helped her select a prom dress. I saw her receive her varsity letter. We took our family trip to France. I helped with her college applications. She decided on Penrose, where she majored in Economics. She graduated, moved to the city to work for a non-profit. She left that place to work at the UN. She met a boy from Kenya. Her father liked him well enough; I was never able to talk much with him. He made Yvonne happy, though, so when she called to say they were engaged, I screamed and played the ecstatic mother. I was afraid they would move to Nairobi, where his people were. They didn't, and settled in Westchester. They had two children: a girl, Tonya; and a boy, Reuben. The three and then the four of them visited holidays, and Yvonne's father and I drove down to them as often as they could tolerate us.

"Don't I sound like someone's grandmother?" Minerva said. "I could talk about that life all day. This life… well, it's been less pleasant. The changes to my appearance are obvious: people I worked beside twenty years don't recognize me. Most of the last six months, I've been in pain. First, it was arthritis, lighting my hips and shoulders on fire. Aspirin helped for a time, then I had to schedule an appointment with my doctor. I've been in her office a lot; it seems that, if I'm not with Yvonne, I'm with Dr. Citera. She wrote me a prescription for something to dampen the joint pain, as well as a calcium supplement for the osteoporosis she picked up on. My bones had

turned to kindling. Not long after that, my kidneys started acting up, and my blood sugar went on a roller-coaster ride. More pills helped with all of that, but there wasn't much they could do about the wasting of my muscles, the weight melting off me. My doctor's convinced I'm suffering from an underlying condition that's the root cause of everything else, one of those rare diseases that spurs rapid aging. When my liver numbers came back bad, she wanted to send me up to Albany Med to consult a specialist. I appreciated her concern; to tell the truth, I felt bad not being able to tell her that she was right, my maladies did share a common source. What good would it have done, though, to have explained that my physical decline was the result of continued contact with a book whose pages had been razored from an unimaginable eye? She would have added dementia to my list of symptoms. As kindly as I could, I declined the trip to Albany Med, uttered the old-lady cliché about it being my time to go when it was my time to go that I'd heard my grandmother use in her final months. The doctor wasn't happy, but she respected my decision.

"Now… now, it's a question of how much more time I can manage with my daughter before my body gives out. I'm hoping to see my granddaughter graduate high school. If not…" She shrugged. "Pain has become a constant, to the extent that it follows me into the other life. Yvonne's noticed me grimacing, had me consult a doctor over there. He's running tests for cancer. I can't tell him the truth, either. Or Yvonne, for that matter: the last thing I want is for my time with her to be spent with her worrying I've lost my mind.

"It occurs to me," Minerva said, "here at the end, that there were other routes my life might have traveled, other possibilities the book might have shown me. Maybe if I'd known how to use it properly, I could have lived some of them, too. You know, when I was in high school, there was a time I thought I was going to be an Olympic fencer? I competed nationally, won more than I lost. Could I have witnessed that life? Or was the time I missed with Yvonne always going to be what I saw?

"Bit late to worry about it now, I suppose."

Whatever the expression on my face was, it caused Minerva to laugh. I blushed, looked down. "I'm sorry," I said.

“Don’t worry,” she said. “I’m not so far gone I don’t know how all of this sounds. I appreciate you listening to me. I think I needed to hear myself tell the story to someone before—while I still could.”

“Do you—”

“There’s nothing for you to do—nothing you could do. Even if I never open this book again, my days have reached their limit. I’d just as soon spend them with my daughter.”

“But—”

“You can let yourself out. Give my best to your wife.”

Already, her gaze was drifting to the book in her lap. I stood, said, “I’ll see you,” and walked toward the apartment door on legs stiff from sitting so long. My skull felt tight, full past the brim with Minerva’s delusion. Fascination at the scenario she’d constructed competed with raw sadness at the crumbling of a fine mind. Hand on the doorknob, I paused, overcome with guilt at leaving someone in such a state on their own. I turned and hurried back to the living room, an apology forming on my lips.

The sight of Minerva dried my words. She was holding the book in both hands, tilted upright, her neck inclined toward it. From my position, I could see that the pages open before her were indeed blank. They trembled, as if composed of a substance less solid than paper. From the page to Minerva’s right, a slender white tube extended to her right eye, plunging into it. From the page to her left, another such tube rose to the base of her throat, piercing the skin there. While I watched, Minerva faded, growing steadily less distinct, and the white tubes, the pages of the book, filled with pale light. Through her silhouette, I saw at a distance a space like a garden, its myriad of paths branching one from the other, forming a design too vast and complex to take in, each path trod by a version of Minerva Baker.

I stumbled backward. I had to do something, had to save Minerva from this impossible fate But this imperative sat somewhere high above, divorced from the rest of me, and when I acted, it was to run to the door, throw it open, and rush out without closing it behind me.

Two weeks later, Minerva Baker died. At her request, her wake was closed casket. Her funeral was held at the Huguenot Reformed Church on

Founders' Street. I attended her wake, but not the funeral. I had not returned to her apartment since fleeing it, my heart pounding.

A week and a half after that, the mail carrier delivered a large, padded envelope addressed to me in Minerva's spiky script. I knew its contents before I sliced open one end and peered inside. Without removing the Supplement, I set Minerva's last communication to me on the kitchen table and walked into the living room. Alexa wasn't home, wouldn't be home till later this evening. The past months—the past year, really—she hadn't been spending a lot of time at the house. To be fair, when we were together, our conversation didn't go much past what we were having for dinner, what bills were due, occasional gossip about work. She had miscarried at five months, and while we had clung together desperately in the immediate aftermath of our loss, the further we went from it, the further we went from one another, too.

I wandered from the living room down the hallway to the door of what was supposed to have been the nursery. Antonia: that was the name we'd picked. Antonia Rose. I opened the door and stepped into the room. We'd talked about doing something else with the space—it was one of the few discussions we still had—but our plans had remained that.

The gliding rocker we'd bought was in its place beside the empty crib. I sat in it. I considered the crib, the stenciled animals decorating the walls. I thought about Minerva's book, safe in its padded case, about what it could show me. I thought about the child whose cries, never voiced, I'd never stopped hearing.

To See, to Be Seen

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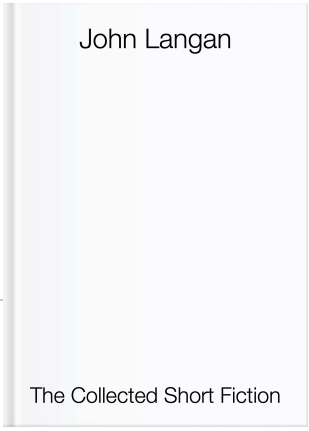

1

Diaz had the guy's story. He always knew the details of whoever's place they were clearing out. How, Carpentier couldn't figure. It wasn't as if Google turned up any information about the people who'd lost their houses (he'd checked). They were part of the ongoing collapse of the housing bubble, the calamity that had pulled the larger economy into a pit that appeared to have no bottom. Most of them had walked away from the lives their over-mortgaged houses represented, taking only what could be carried in overnight bags and suitcases, abandoning the furniture, the appliances, the electronics whose costs crowded the credit cards they had defaulted on. They were a type, but somehow, Diaz was aware of their individual histories. For a time, Carpentier had assumed Ocampo gave Diaz the information, but the boss claimed not to know anything about the former owners of the houses whose contents they removed. The creditors had a guy who called Ocampo, gave him the address, told him where the find the key to the front door, and that was all. Nor did the payment for the completed job come with bonus facts about the men and women whose sofas and refrigerators Ocampo, Diaz, and Carpentier had spent hours relocating. Eventually, Carpentier asked Diaz point-blank where he'd heard these stories he told. Diaz shrugged, looked away, and said, "You know, around," and refused to be drawn any further on the subject. Annoyed, Carpentier decided that what his coworker was telling them was most likely his own invention, fiction.

Except there were enough instances where Diaz's narratives coincided with the contents of the houses with such quirky accuracy that it seemed he had to be in possession of some secret source of information. The third place Carpenter had worked with him, a pale green McMansion in Huguenot

whose strip of overgrown lawn was the same size as the front walk, Diaz had predicted they would be done with quickly. “Couple put all their money in the house,” he said. “Although there’s supposed to be a nice TV in the living room and some top flight Scotch in the liquor cabinet.” Which there was—as there was a top flight gas grill on a house in Cold Spring’s back deck, and a framed display of vintage baseball cards hung in the study of a place in Rhinebeck. There was never a question of Diaz taking any of the things he described, which, in the case of smaller items like the gold-inlaid music box or the trio of Seiko watches, he could have. Yes, Ocampo had a strict no-stealing policy; even the liquor they found, he did not want them drinking. But he had only ever asked them if their pockets were empty, and that, months ago, when Diaz was new and Carpentier was newer. At this point, it would have been easy enough to remove one or two little things without raising Ocampo’s suspicion. But no: all of it, every last bit of property in the houses, they packed or wrapped, loaded onto the truck, and delivered to one of several warehouses down in Westchester.

After he had been working for Ocampo for a couple of months, Carpentier felt sufficiently comfortable to tack on a last-minute addition to their house-clearing routine. Once the truck was full, the rear door lowered and locked, Carpentier returned to the now-empty house. He told Diaz and Ocampo that he was making sure they hadn’t forgotten anything, which Ocampo at first believed, crediting Carpentier as a conscientious worker, then grew suspicious of, demanding to know if Carpentier had hidden something, a small valuable he was running back to reclaim. Carpentier wasn’t, and turned out his pockets as proof of his honesty. Diaz spoke up on his behalf, told the boss to be calm, the guy was being responsible, Ocampo should be grateful. When the two of them were on their own—walking out to their cars, say—Carpentier expected Diaz to ask what he was up to with his final inspections. He did not.

In fact, Carpentier told him one night, when they stopped at a sports bar near their office in downtown Poughkeepsie prior to heading to their respective homes. He had been debating the matter with himself for several days. Following their toast to another day cleaning up other folks’ messes, Carpentier drained half his Heineken and, as the alcohol splashed around

his stomach, started to speak. “You, uh, you know how I go through the houses before we leave?”

“Yeah,” Diaz said.

“First—you know I’m not stealing anything, right? Hiding stuff and taking it when no one’s around?”

“I know it.”

“What it is, is there’s this feeling I get.”

“You get a feeling.”

“Yeah.”

“What kind of feeling?”

“That’s what I’m trying to figure out how to say. Like, nothing.”

“You don’t feel anything?”

“No,” Carpentier said, “I feel *nothing.* It’s like… Okay: if we were in a really old place, somewhere people had been living for, you know, generations, it would have a certain kind of…energy. Like all the stuff that happened there, all the history, had left an impression. Or, as if the house was a battery, and it had built up a charge that could be measured, like… like with a voltmeter. That’s what I am, the voltmeter. These places we’re emptying, though, most of them are too new for any of that kind of stuff—for a charge to have built up. You’d think that would be that. Like you said, there wouldn’t be anything to feel. Except there is. There’s this space… not inside the house, but this other space, that’s waiting for what whoever was living there was supposed to give it. I noticed it a while ago, on the first couple of jobs we did. I wanted to, I don’t know, check it out, so that’s what I’ve been doing.” Carpentier was suddenly aware that he had been talking for a long time. He looked down, embarrassment coloring his face.

“Man,” Diaz said with a grin, “that is some fucked-up shit. Crazy.” He drank from his beer, shook his head. “You psychic or something?”

“Nah,” Carpentier said. “I don’t know. I mean, I’ve always been aware there was something going on in houses I was in, but I didn’t think anything of it. This is the first time I’ve picked up on this particular feeling.”

“Well, that’s a relief,” Diaz said, “‘cause I got shit I do not want you finding out about.”

The joke served its purpose, defusing the awkwardness that had gathered around Carpentier’s confession. Diaz moved the conversation onto the subject of the latest Prince CD, which Carpentier hadn’t heard and Diaz said was some of the singer’s best work, ever. “I’ll burn you a copy,” he said, a gesture Carpentier said wasn’t necessary but Diaz insisted was no trouble. “You got to be educated, young man,” he said, which Carpentier found funny, because Diaz and he were the same age.

Afterward, once Carpentier was in his room at the boarding house in Hyde Park, he thought that what he’d said to Diaz, the way he’d tried to explain what he experienced in those emptied houses, hadn’t been right at all. He hadn’t told Diaz how fragile the houses seemed, how flimsy, as if they were stage sets, painted plywood and lighting effects, the theater on the other side of their false walls. And in the seats, watching his progress through the houses… what? What audience regarded his performance? He didn’t know.

2

A couple of weeks later, the day’s assignment took them north to Wiltwyck, to an address on Montague Street that Carpentier thought looked like a witch’s house. Orange with brown trim, it was tall, narrow, the peaked roof overhanging the second storey in a way that made the residence appear to be wearing a giant pointed hat. The place was sided with rows of wooden shingles whose lower ends were curved, which gave the impression it was covered in scales. Its paint was faded, chipped in spots. Situated at the top of a short rise, the house stood at one end of a block whose other dwellings were larger, multi-family structures on whose front steps men of various ages sat alone and in pairs, the hands of more than one clutching bottles wrapped in brown paper bags. To reach the front door, you had to climb six marble stairs set in the ground, then another half dozen wooden steps. It wasn’t the worst situation they’d encountered, not by a long shot, but the stairs were the type of extra complication that would grow noticeable as the job progressed. Ocampo parked the truck so the rear door was at the foot of the stairs.

“So,” Carpentier said to Diaz as they pulled their work gloves on, hauled blankets out of the back of the truck, “what’re we gonna find in here?”

“Seems this guy,” Diaz said, “was a movie freak. Collected all kinds of shit: posters, props, some costumes.”

“Huh,” Ocampo said.

“All right,” Carpentier said.

There was more of the movie-related stuff than Carpentier expected. There was more of everything than he expected. Unlike the places they usually cleared, which hadn’t been inhabited long enough to fill with many possessions, this house held the detritus of decades. On the first floor, every available foot of wall space was lined with bookcases, their shelves stacked two and in some cases three volumes deep. The kitchen table, a desk in the back room, card tables scattered throughout the rooms held stacks of paper, most of them covered in single-spaced typeprint, with a few photocopies of black and white pictures that hadn’t been that clear to begin with. A stale odor of must lay heavy on the air. In the kitchen, beside a toaster oven whose glass door was opaque with baked-on grime, a flat wicker basket held layers of envelopes on whose fronts were printed URGENT and FINAL TERMINATION NOTICE in large red letters. “What do you think happened?” Carpentier asked.

Ocampo shrugged. “Not my problem.”

“Home equity loan on an overvalued property,” Diaz said. “Has to be.”

“Man, you should be in real estate,” Ocampo said.

Diaz smiled. “Who says I’m not?”

Ocampo snorted.

The second floor was considerably tidier. A pair of conjoined offices held display cases in which an assortment of small items was arranged on red velvet. A pair of round, tortoiseshell glasses, the right lens cracked, the legs askew, sat next to a nickel-plated revolver, beside which was a faded cream fedora with a blue band. There were no cards next to any of what Carpentier assumed were film props to identify them. Unsurprisingly, Diaz recognized a few. Leaning over a case, he said, “Those are Clark Kent’s glasses from *Superman II*. The scene where he gets his ass handed to him in the diner.

The gun was held by Sam Spade in *The Maltese Falcon.* The hat…that's Peter Ustinov's hat, isn't it?"

"If you say so," Carpentier said.

"What was the movie? *We're No Angels?* The one with the snake, Adolph? That gets the halo, too, at the end?"

"No idea," Carpentier said.

"Don't you watch any movies?" Diaz said.

"Sure," Carpentier said. "I watch movies."

"Whatever's on HBO, right?"

"Nah, I can't afford that shit. Network."

"Damn."

Despite his coworker's attempt at making him feel ignorant, Carpentier knew the titles on most of the posters framed on the walls. *The Man in the Iron Mask. Citizen Kane. On the Waterfront. Kramer vs. Kramer*. Those hung in what must have been the bedroom were in foreign languages, German and what he was pretty sure was Japanese, but he recognized the word Nosferatu under a line drawing of a bald, white-skinned man with pointed ears and a vampire's fangs. "Hey," he said, "I know this one. It's about a vampire."

"Good for you," Ocampo said from where he was measuring the bed.

"Where's Diaz?"

"I sent him to check the attic."

The stairs to the attic were behind a door in the room next to the bedroom, what might have been a spare bedroom but was now filled with long clothes racks, each dangling clear plastic garment bags in which were zippered suits and dresses new and old, uniforms of armies real and imaginary. A samurai sword and a saber were mounted one under the other on the rear wall. No doubt Diaz could sift through the costumes here and name the actor who wore it, the movie they wore it in, and what they had for breakfast the last time they had it on. He crossed to the stairs.

Unfinished and unfurnished, the attic was an open space dominated by the thick brick chimney rising through its floor up out its ceiling. In front of the

chimney, lying on a pair of sawhorses, was what Carpentier took for a coffin: a rectangular box, lidless, behind which Diaz stood with his arms crossed, shaking his head slowly from side to side. “I did not believe it,” he said as Carpentier walked toward him. “I knew it was supposed to be here—the information was good—but it seemed so… obvious, you know? Like here, in this place, is where you’re gonna find this. Of course you are, right? When we didn’t see it on the first floor, or the second, I thought, *I knew it.* Then I climb those stairs, and…” He nodded at the crate. Carpentier was shocked to see the man’s eyes bright with tears.

“What is it?”

“Oh,” Diaz said, wiping his eyes, “oh, you have no idea. This is a piece of a movie that was made a long time ago. We’re talking black and white, silent. *Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari. The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari.* Ring a bell?”

“No.”

“No,” Diaz said. “No. It’s one of the greats. It’s about—there’s this guy in it, Dr. Caligari. He’s a traveling entertainer, a hypnotist. He has this guy, Cesare, he’s kept in a trance forever. Cesare lies in a box—in this box. When Caligari does his shows, he props up the box so the audience can get an eyeful of Cesare—who’s dressed all in black, with this creepy-ass white face with big black circles around his eyes. Because he’s in a trance, Cesare’s supposed to have access to hidden knowledge. The audience can ask him questions about whatever they want. Which isn’t to say they like his answers.

“Anyway, after the film was done shooting, most of the props were taken apart, repurposed for other productions. No one knew they’d made a masterpiece, that stuff connected to it would be valuable. This was a movie, cheap entertainment for the masses. Cesare’s box, though,” Diaz wagged his right index finger at it, “somehow, this survived. Crazy. You would think, if there’s one thing you’re gonna find a use for, it’s a box. Nope. It’s a woman who saves it, some Austrian countess who sends her lawyer to make inquiries about the prop and offer a ridiculous sum of money for it. The rich are not like you and me, that’s for damn sure. Or maybe not: you ever collect anything? Comic books? Trading cards?”

“*Star Wars* figures,” Carpentier said, “when I was a kid.”

“There must have been some you really wanted, ones you couldn’t find anywhere, no matter where you looked, which if you could’ve, you would’ve paid more than what they were worth for.”

“I guess, yeah.”

“The countess was into mystical shit, had a castle full of all kinds of weird objects: crystal balls, magic mirrors, cursed statues. Half of it sounds like it came from a fairy tale, the other half from a horror movie. Somehow, this lady had gotten it into her head that Cesare’s box was one of these items, that the process of shooting the film had changed what was a wooden crate into something else, charged it with supernatural power. It’s how magic works, through association, you know? Just to be on the safe side, she carved mystical symbols into the interior. Come here.”

Carpentier did. Inside, the crate’s plain, unvarnished wood had been incised with hundreds of figures. They ranged in size from a dime to a half-dollar. Some he recognized: a sun wearing a collar of triangular rays, a crescent moon, a ringed planet, a comet whose tail arced behind it. These were interrupted by more elaborate characters, pentagrams ringed by concentric circles, squares containing circles, flocks of circles connected and arranged by sets of parallel lines into strange geometries. Scattered throughout these symbols, Carpentier saw combinations of letters he thought were Greek, as well as a couple of designs he could not place: a circle broken at about the eight o’clock point, a square whose bottom line turned up inside it then continued to turn at ninety-degree angles within it, forming a kind of stylized maze. Although he hadn’t set foot in a church since his father’s funeral five years ago, Carpentier had the urge to cross himself. He resisted it, opting instead for, “What the fuck?”

“You a Friend of Borges?” Diaz asked.

“Who? Borges? I don’t think so. Should I be?”

“It’s a group,” Diaz said. “They’re into puzzles and shit—weird puzzles, I mean. They’re named after a guy who wrote stories about that kind of stuff.”

“Oh. No, man, I’m not much good at those games.”

“It’s cool. It’s just, if you were, this would be, like, the mother lode.”

“Yeah,” Carpentier said, “I can see that. So what about the lady who wrote all this? The countess? What happened to her?”

“World War II,” Diaz said. “She was a Nazi; didn’t work out too well for her. After the war, Cesare’s box moved around a lot. Orson Welles had it for a little while. You know who he was?”

“Yeah,” Carpentier said. “The *Touch of Evil* guy, right?”

“Nice,” Diaz said, nodding. “He was thinking about shooting his own version of *Dr. Caligari*, maybe playing the doctor, himself—which would have been sick. He liked the idea of using the prop from the original movie. When his version didn’t happen, he sold the box. Eventually, it came to the US. Went from collector to collector, until it wound up here.”

“Huh,” Carpentier said. “That’s pretty wild. You have to wonder why the guy didn’t sell it.”

“What do you mean?”

“He was obviously in trouble. What’d you say, bad home equity loan? This thing,” Carpentier gestured at the crate, “must be worth a lot. Could’ve paid off what he owed, maybe. At least got him back on his feet.”

“Pretty hard to let go of something like this.”

“What about letting go of your house? Not to mention, the box is still here. Wherever the guy went, he didn’t take it with him.”

“Maybe he was experimenting with it.”

“What?”

“Like the countess, trying to tap into its mystical power.”

The suggestion was ridiculous, but rather than making him laugh, it made Carpentier’s mouth dry. “Sure,” he said. “He was talking to the spirits here, in Wiltwyck.”

“Why not?” Diaz said. “You think your location would matter to a bunch of ghosts?”

“I guess they don’t have bodies, do they?”

“Exactly. You know, this whole area—the Hudson Valley—used to have a reputation for weird shit.”

“Like the Headless Horseman?”

“No, I’m talking about legitimately strange goings-on. What my old grandma would have called some serious *brujería*. This was before the Civil War, middle of the nineteenth century. Everyone was into Spiritualism, which was their version of New Age stuff. The mediums who came here said they had visions of supernatural creatures, of passages to the spirit world.”

“I thought it didn’t matter where you contacted the spirits.”

“It doesn’t, but that doesn’t mean some places won’t make it easier.”

“Whatever,” Carpentier said.

“Hey!” Ocampo shouted from the foot of the attic stairs. “You two find anything up there?”

Had Diaz answered in the negative, Carpentier would not have been surprised. The crate was the single most valuable item they’d come across during any of their jobs; not to mention, Diaz’s knowledge of it was even more extensive than usual. Carpentier half-expected his coworker to try to talk him into leaving the prop where it was and returning for it later, with a promise of a generous percentage of the price Diaz received for it. Instead, Diaz called, “Yeah, we got a big-ass crate that’s probably worth a lot of money.”

“Seriously?”

“It’s true,” Carpentier called.

“Goddamnit,” Ocampo said.

As it turned out, Cesare’s box was less difficult to bring down to the truck than Carpentier feared. It was the excess of papers on the first floor that proved to be the job’s biggest challenge. Every last sheet had to be collected in reinforced garbage bags, which were to be delivered together with the furniture and film memorabilia. What should have taken three or four hours stretched to six and a half, by the end of which, Carpentier’s legs were screaming from he’d-lost-count-of-how-many trips up and down stairs. On Diaz’s recommendation, they waited until the truck was almost full to slide Cesare’s box, safely blanketed, on top of the bed of filled garbage bags they had prepared for it. By the time Ocampo lowered the rear door and secured it, Carpentier had lost any desire he might have had for his usual last-

minute walkthrough. “You sure?” Ocampo said when Carpentier told him just to drive.

“Yeah,” Carpentier said. Not only was he exhausted, he was reluctant to feel whatever remained in this house.

3

Later that week, at the end of a long afternoon spent removing heavy wooden furniture from the fifth floor walk-up it was crammed into, Carpentier joined Diaz for a beer at the sports bar. Someone had switched the TV above the bar to one of the cable news channels. The stock market had not reached the end of its decline, while the major banks were teetering like so many shacks in an earthquake. Unemployment was swelling; although the economist the news anchor interviewed insisted that the economy was fundamentally sound and the country was definitely not heading into another depression. One of the other patrons seated at the bear, an overweight woman in a burgundy pantsuit, called to the bartender, “Hey, can you change this shit? I didn’t come here to listen to more bad news.” The bartender reached for the remote, and a baseball game replaced a story about a family who had lost their health insurance together with the mother’s job, and were struggling to cope with the costs of the father’s worsening MS.

Carpentier drained his Heineken. “Fuck,” he said when he was done. “We are so fucked.”

Diaz lifted an eyebrow. “What are you saying?”

“That.” Carpentier waved his empty bottle at the TV. “Not the game, what was on before, the news. Fundamentally sound my ass. We’re already in a depression, man. They’re just playing with the numbers ‘cause they don’t wanna freak out everyone.”

“Sure,” Diaz said. “So?”

“‘So?’ Dude, did you hear a word I said? The economy’s a fucking disaster.”

“Yeah. It is. And who’s got a job?”

“Well—”

“Who’s got a job?” Diaz said. “You do. I do.”

“But that’s only because all these other people got fucked over.”

“Maybe,” Diaz said. “Nothing I can do about it, is there? Doesn’t change the bills I got to pay.”

“Man…” Carpentier searched for words, couldn’t find any. The bartender noticed his empty bottle, pointed at it, but Carpentier shook his head.

“Never mind this shit,” Diaz said. “You up for a drive? There’s something I want to show you.”

“What?”

“You have to come with me.”

“I don’t know,” Carpentier said. “It’s getting late, and I’m pretty exhausted.”

“Come on,” Diaz said. “It’s like five o’clock. This shouldn’t take that long. Honest.”

“Can’t you tell me what it is?”

“Uh-uh. You have to see it.”

“Where is it?”

“Five minutes away. Ten, tops.”

The trip took closer to twenty-five minutes. Since Diaz knew their destination, they took his dinged Accord. He drove them east, out of Poughkeepsie, past strip malls full of vacant storefronts, houses signposted with the placards of realtors, larger buildings whose parking lots were cracked, full of weeds, all the way to the Taconic, where he steered onto the south bound side. There was a Prince album in the CD player, *1999*. When the title track came on, Carpentier said, “You know what this song is about, right?”

“Nineteen ninety-nine?”

“No. That’s a common misperception. It’s actually about nuclear war.”

“What?”

“It’s in the lyrics.”

“If you say so.”

Diaz signaled, slowed, and turned left onto a crossroad that climbed a short, steep slope. As the road leveled, Carpentier saw houses lining both sides of it. They were large, boxy, their lawns overgrown, their driveways empty, their windows dark. Diaz drove past half a dozen of the dwellings and swung left onto a side street. It was lined with more houses of the same style, the second storeys overhanging the first, as if a child had stacked a larger block on a smaller one. Their roofs slanted to sharp peaks. None of the places on this street appeared inhabited, either, nor did those on the cul-de-sac Diaz made a right onto. The evening light made the houses look curiously flat, as if each had been painted on a huge piece of wood and propped up. Diaz drove to the end of the dead-end, straight into the driveway of the house there. Carpentier couldn't see anything especially noteworthy about this residence; although he noticed that it shared its minimal backyard with a house facing the opposite direction, toward the end of another cul-de-sac bordered by more vacant houses. Diaz parked the car and climbed out of it.

"You know what these were priced at?" Diaz said to Carpentier when he shut his door.

"I don't know," Carpentier said. "Three hundred thousand?"

"Not bad," Diaz said. "Four. Too much for most of the locals, but for someone living in Westchester, say, and willing to travel a little bit to get to their job in the City, that's about two hundred less than they might spend. That's pretty good."

"Until it wasn't."

"Until it wasn't. You might have sold a few of them, but all this…"

After a moment, Carpentier said, "So this is what you wanted to show me?"

"Inside."

"In there?" Carpentier nodded at the house, but Diaz was already striding up its front walk. By the time Carpentier reached the door, Diaz had removed and opened the keybox hung from the doorknob and was slotting the key into the lock. "What are you doing?"

Diaz glanced at him. "Seems pretty obvious to me."

Dim, the house's bare rooms echoed with their footsteps. Carpentier accompanied Diaz as he completed a slow circuit of the first floor. Had his coworker brought him along to strip the house of its valuable materials, copper wire and the like? Carpentier couldn't imagine the place held enough copper to be worth the risk of discovery by the cops; although, what was the likelihood of the police devoting much attention to a neighborhood of empty houses? The most they were likely to do was drive up and down the main street and move on. Which meant that, provided Diaz had access to other houses, he could have the run of the development until at least sunrise. Carpentier was brainstorming excuses for why he had to return to his car when Diaz stopped, turned to him, and said, "Well? What do you feel?"

"What do you mean?"

"A few weeks ago, at the bar, you were telling me about the sensation you get walking through these houses after we've cleared them out."

"Yeah?"

"So I'm asking you what you're getting here, now."

"I don't know," Carpentier said. "I haven't been paying attention to it."

"You were worried I drove you to this place to rob it, weren't you?"

"No, that wasn't—"

"It's cool," Diaz said. "I played it pretty mysterious; I don't blame you."

"We drove all the way out here because you wanted to know how it made me feel?"

"Come on, man. What you described was more than that."

"Maybe. But why did we need to come to this spot? I mean, we could've gone to any empty house. Isn't as if there's a shortage of them."

True," Diaz said. "But this location… if you were to look at a map of this neighborhood, you would see that the house we're in sits at the perihelion of the dead-end. It's back-to-back with the house that occupies the same position the next dead-end over. Imagine a pair of horseshoes placed with the closed sides touching, the legs facing away from one another. It's a spot where certain kinds of energy might converge."

“I’m not sure what you’re talking about.”

“That group I mentioned? The Friends of Borges? We study stuff like this. We know about these kinds of things. Look,” Diaz said, “don’t worry about it. Just tell me what you’re picking up on here.”

“Seriously?”

“Seriously.”

The thing was, Carpentier was aware of something, an intensification of his previous sensation. It was as if the walls were great sheets of paper, surrounded by a space from which a sound was audible, a low droning that caused the walls to vibrate—that Carpentier felt in his teeth, his bones, a kind of deep-seated ache. Something about the drone, a peculiarity of the way its single note went on and on, gave an impression of its source, an enormous throat, its gelid sides quivering. “Yeah,” Carpentier said, “I’m definitely getting a… vibe off this place. Like the other houses, but more, you know?”

“Okay,” Diaz said, “good. Come this way.”

“Is this gonna take much longer?” Carpentier said. “‘Cause the sun’s going down, and I don’t want to be stumbling around here in the dark.”

“Not much longer at all,” Diaz said. “Come on.”

Carpentier followed him up the stairs to the second floor. A short hall on the left off the main hallway led to an open doorway, which admitted them to a large, L-shaped space: the master bedroom, Carpentier guessed. In the corner to their left, an oblong shape stood propped against the walls. Except for the change of location, Cesare’s box appeared unchanged from the attic in Wiltwyck. “Dude,” he said to Diaz. “Dude. What the fuck is this?”

“It’s all right,” Diaz said. “I know what you’re thinking, but it’s all right.”

“Oh really? And exactly what am I thinking?”

“That I stole the box, and I’m trying to make you a part of it. Which,” he added, “is not what’s going on.”

“You just found this here.”

“Don’t be an asshole. Of course I brought it here. One of the guys I know at the Friends of Borges, he’s got some money. Scratch that: he’s got a lot of

money. After we dropped off the box at the warehouse, I called this guy, told him about it, how much it had to be worth. He made some calls, some bills changed hands, and it was his. All perfectly legal."

"Then why is it here? Is your friend planning to buy this place?"

"I told you: our group, it's interested in weird shit. Like what you experience when you're in one of these places. I had mentioned our conversation to another member of the Friends. She knew about this development, said it might be an idea to bring you here and see what happened. I was planning to do that when we found the prop. I thought maybe it would give you a boost."

"Give me a—you realize how crazy this shit sounds."

"Please. You're already halfway there with your Psychic Friends deal."

"Whatever," Carpentier said. "I'm done. I'm out of here." He turned toward the door.

"Thought you might say that," Diaz said. He dug his right hand into the front pocket of his jeans. Carpentier tensed, expecting him to produce a knife, even a gun, but when his hand emerged, it was holding a thick roll of bills wrapped in rubber bands. "Five hundred bucks," he said, tossing the money to Carpentier. "For humoring me."

"How do I know this is five hundred dollars?"

"Jesus Christ," Diaz said, rolling his eyes. "Count it."

Carpentier tugged the rubber bands off the roll, relaxing it into a wave of twenty dollar bills. He thumbed through them, stopping every five or six notes to check for fakes, green paper with green magic-marker on it.

"Satisfied?"

He was holding five hundred dollars in his hand. "You're serious about this?"

"As a motherfucking heart attack," Diaz said. "Do you want the money?"

It wasn't much of a question. Carpentier nodded, removing his wallet and wedging the money into it. He had to force the wallet into his pocket. "Okay. What do you want me to do?"

“Get in the box,” Diaz said. “Carefully. The thing’s still a priceless piece of film history.”

From the outside, Cesare’s box appeared narrow, too tight for Carpentier to fit in comfortably. To his surprise, once he leaned back into it, shoulders hunched, arms crossed, there was ample room for him to relax. As he looked out at Diaz, the empty room, he had the momentary impression something was off about them, as if he were seeing them through the thick lens of a friend’s glasses. When he focused on anything, though, it appeared fine, undistorted.

Diaz had retrieved a can of spray paint from beside the box and was bent over, marking a large, silver circle around the box. The paint’s metallic reek filled the air. “Maybe you don’t care, but here’s the theory behind what we’re doing. *In The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari,* the box is the spot from which Cesare has his visions. As far as that story is concerned, that’s its function. ‘But wait,’ you say, ‘that shit was made up.’ That’s true. Thing is, a whole lot of people saw that piece of make-believe, and they bought it. Not for real, but the way you do when you’re watching a movie. That was after all the actors, the director, had done more-or-less the same thing. It was enough; it solidified the role the film had given the box. This is why that countess was so desperate to get her hands on it. The prop was full of all this accumulated energy, energy that kept accumulating every time another audience sat through the movie. The stuff she did to it—the carvings—not to mention, the stuff she did with it, augmented it.”

Aware of the wad of money pressing against his ass, Carpentier said, “I’m sorry man, but you’re talking shit. That’s…magic. That isn’t how the world works.”

“I guess we’ll find out.” Diaz was almost finished with his circle. Instead of completing it, however, he left an arc open directly in front of the crate.

“Run out of paint?” Carpentier said.

“Circles keep things out,” Diaz said, straightening, “and in. the broken circle helps to channel forces the way you want them to go.”

“You really are into this shit. I’m kind of impressed.”

“Yeah, well, it’s not the kind of thing you talk about over lunch.” Diaz set the spray can on the floor. “You ready to give this a try?”

“I suppose. What do you want me to do?”

“Same thing as downstairs.”

Carpentier was on the verge of asking Diaz how he suggested he do that crammed into an upright coffin, but the fact was, while the two of them had been talking, he had noticed the return of the sensations he’d experienced on the first floor, only amplified, as if the volume on a radio playing in the background had been dialed from one to five, not enough to distinguish the lyrics of whatever was playing, but more than sufficient to pick out the tune and name the artist. As he concentrated on his impression of the house, it increased again, the volume being spun to ten. He flinched. “Shit, man.”

“What is it?” Diaz said. “What’s happening? Are you getting anything?”

“Yeah,” Carpentier said. “It’s pretty strong.” He swallowed. “Hate to say it, but you were right. The box is definitely amping things up.”

“Good,” Diaz said. “Good.”

“I don’t know.” The room’s walls were rice-paper thin, vibrating like drum skins with the drone Carpentier had tuned into downstairs, which had escalated to concert-level. The light in the room dimmed, the way it did in a theater before the performance started. Across from Carpentier, the walls glowed with pale luminescence, then faded translucent, transparent. “I’m seeing something.”

“What? Can you describe it?”

It was a bare, white floor, surrounded on three sides by darkness. He might have been looking at a stage, or the floor of a cave. At the far end of the space, almost but not quite concealed by the dark, a figure squatted. “It’s—there’s nothing there. Aside from a floor, I mean. But there’s someone on the other side of it.”

“Who? What do they look like?”

“No, I can’t… Wait. Something’s happening.” From out of the darkness, a low, heavy fog poured across the floor. In a moment, the surface was gone, hidden beneath roiling vapor. “There’s like, fog all over the place now.”

“What about the person? What’re they doing?”

“Hang on…” The shape rose to its feet. There was something wrong—something profoundly wrong with it. Slowly, it shuffled toward the center

of the space. As it drew nearer, his stomach lurched, its contents rushing halfway up his throat. “Aw, no,” he said, “aw no, man, come on.”

“Talk to me,” Diaz said. “Tell me what you’re seeing.

How could he? Maybe he could have called the naked figure a man and left it at that. He could have omitted the deathly pallor of the man’s flesh, the way it trembled as if not entirely solid anymore. He would have found it more difficult to avoid mentioning the shades of red smeared and crusted around the man’s mouth and jaw, his neck and chest, his hands and forearms. He could not have ignored the massive wound that was the man’s belly, a bloody space from which the contents had been removed with terrific violence.

“Talk to me,” Diaz said.

“It’s a guy,” Carpentier said, “there’s a guy, and he’s—his stomach—his intestines—it’s all gone, but he’s still moving, still walking around.”

“Okay,” Diaz said, “okay, good. What else do you see?”

Quickly as it had arrived, the fog was departing, sinking to the floor and draining into it. On the way, it revealed a group of people at the disemboweled man’s feet: a man and a woman, a girl and a boy. The man and the woman looked mid-to-late thirties, the kids either side of ten. All were dressed well: the adults in a suit and blazer and skirt, the children in new jeans and long-sleeved t-shirts with Pokémon characters on them. The stereotypical white, upper-middle-class American family. Around them, the floor was littered with dozens of nails, each anywhere from six to nine inches long. A few claw hammers were scattered amongst the nails.

“There’s a family,” Carpentier said, “um, Mom, Dad, couple kids. They’re on the ground—lying on the ground. The fog’s gone. They’re surrounded by hammers and nails. I’m talking big nails. They…oh, hey. Hey, no, don’t do that. No. Hey! Hey! Jesus! Fuck!”

The people on the floor were scrambling for the hammers, the nails. The instant each had a hammer and a nail, they twisted to whoever was closest, pressed the point of the nail against their arm, leg, or chest, and brought the hammer down. The nails dove through their clothing. Faces contorted, the family members slapped the ground for a second nail, seizing it and smacking it into the nearest limb. Blood splashed the mother’s blazer, the

father’s slacks, the children’s jeans. They hammered nails into one another’s calves, shoulders, knees, feet. The nails grew difficult to handle, the hammers slipped from their bloody hands and clattered on the floor. They retrieved the tools and continued their gory work. Ten, twelve nails protruded from each member of the family. Their blood smeared the ground, soaked their clothes. The children joined forces, succeeded in nailing the father’s left foot to the floor. In a shower of blood, he tore his foot free, pivoting on his side to set a nail against the mother’s thigh.

“What?” Diaz said. “What?”

“They’re using them on one another,” Carpentier said. Tears were streaming down his cheeks. “The hammers and nails.”

“How about the Gullet?”

“What?”

“The other guy—the one with the missing insides.”

“He’s…” The ravaged figure had lowered to a squat in the midst of the violence. Blood spattered his white flesh. The mother turned her attention from the nail she’d pounded into her daughter’s back to raise her cupped left hand to the empty man’s mouth. He caught her hand with both of his, steadying it while he brought his lips to it. He slurped its contents, which pattered out of his torn esophagus in red droplets. The boy held up both his hands for the creature to drink from; he did, blood trickling from the wound of his throat onto his ruined pelvis. “He’s drinking their blood,” Carpentier said. “They’re offering it to him, and he’s fucking drinking it.” The father’s benefaction was followed by the daughter’s.

“And he’s satisfied with it?” Diaz said.

“How the fuck should I know?”

“Okay,” Diaz said, “okay. Be cool.”

The figure Diaz had called the Gullet stood, allowing the family to devote their full attention to one another. With a shift of the creature’s head, Carpentier realized that he had been discovered. For a moment, the Gullet considered him, then began to move in his direction. “Oh shit.”

“What is it?”

“He saw me. The guy—the Gullet saw me and he’s headed this way.” Carpentier shifted side to side, trying to work his way forward out of the crate.

“Hey!” Diaz said. “What’re you doing?”

“Did you not hear me? The fucking guy saw me, and he’s coming over here. We need to move.” Carpentier pushed and pulled, but it was as if the box had shrunk around him. No matter what direction he turned, Cesare’s box held him fast “What is this shit?”

The hiss of spray paint being discharged drew his eyes down. Diaz had grabbed the can of silver paint and was completing the broken circle from outside its circumference. Once that was done, he dropped the can and regarded Carpentier. “This kind of information,” he said, “it’s hard to come by. Lots of risk. The inhabitants of the Base are unpredictable. Most of the time, they’ll leave you alone. Not always, though. It’s a shame. I thought we got along okay.”

“What are you doing?” Carpentier said. Already, the Gullet was approaching the room’s walls.

“The price you pay,” Diaz said. “Well, the price you pay for us. Some kind of lesson in economics there, right?”

“Come on,” Carpentier said. “Get me out of here, man, come on.”

“None of the Friends is sure what the Gullet is, exactly,” Diaz said. He was backing towards the doorway. “Some say he’s a god, a remnant of one of the old pantheons, the bloody ones. Others say he’s a manifestation of the collective psyche—which, to be honest, sounds like the same thing to me. One member says he’s an ideation with teeth. I just thought you might want to know, we don’t understand him, ourselves. But he does have his uses. And, I’m afraid, his costs.”

The Gullet pushed one pale hand through the wall, into the room. The air rippled.

“Please,” Carpentier said. “Please man, please.”

The empty man slid the rest of his arm out of the wall.

“We’ll find someone to replace you,” Diaz said, “don’t worry.” He was standing outside the doorway. “Lot of people looking for work. Looks like

there will be, too, for a while. Oh," he added, before he left, "and the box should be fine."

What is Lost, What is Given Away

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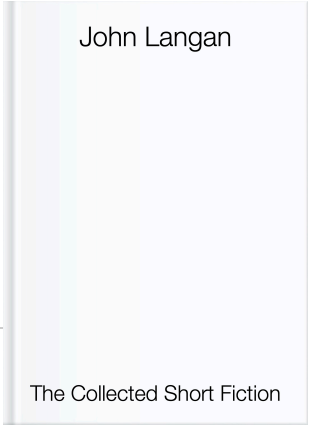

I

My ten-year high school reunion, held in the fall of 1997, was a disappointment. This should not have been a terrible surprise, but I'm afraid I had bought into the scenarios played out in endless movies and TV shows, the ones where all the old animosities, the divisions between jock and nerd, popular and outcast, are put aside, and the former classmates discover that their similarities outweigh their differences—as, of course, they always had. What I found instead was that a decade had not been sufficient time to alter much beyond hairlines and waistbands. I learned other things, too.

The reunion was a two-night affair, with an informal meet-and-greet at the bar of the Castle, a local restaurant, on Friday, and a formal dinner at the Poughkeepsie Tennis Club on Saturday. In between, those who wanted to rekindle their school spirit brighter still could attend Our Lady of Fatima's homecoming game Saturday afternoon. Starting Friday, I had the sense that the weekend was not going to live up to my hopes for it. For one thing, no one recognized me. To be fair, I had changed more than anyone else there. When I graduated, I was six feet tall, one hundred and fifty or sixty pounds if I was wearing a heavy coat. I had gained another sixty pounds in the intervening years, as well as a beard that was the same light brown my hair had darkened to in my early twenties. None of my old classmates had deviated as dramatically from their former appearances, so it was perhaps to be expected that they would not know me. They were not prepared to.

All the same, I found this disconcerting. I walked past people paired and grouped as they had been in the halls of Fatima, and their gazes slid over me without catching on anything. While I had not been the class president, or captain of the football team, or even the class clown, I had been in the

drama club, acting the part of the villainous Jonathan in the senior class production of *Arsenic and Old Lace*; I had lettered in spring track (hurdles) twice; I had played an active role in discussions and debates in our English, social studies, and religion classes. Especially since our graduating class numbered one hundred and thirty-two, I assumed I had made some depth of impression on the people I had spent four years with. This did not appear to be the case.

After an hour of sitting at the bar, nursing a Corona and watching the room fill with people exchanging hugs, handshakes, and backslaps, I decided to leave my stool and introduce myself to my former classmates. Standing directly in front of them, I extended my right hand, calling them by their names and reminding them of mine. Yet even so direct an approach did not yield the look of pleased recognition, the firm handshake, the repetition of my name followed by an exclamation of pleasure. Instead, the men and women I greeted took my hand hesitantly, their faces confused, as if, while familiar, my name was not one they could immediately place. After uttering a platitude about how great it was to see me, they resumed the conversations whose breaks had allowed me to make my introduction. The forty-five minutes or so it took to complete my circuit of the room left me disheartened, depressed, and back at the bar. I had come on my own, so there was no point to ordering anything stronger than another beer. I poked the wedge of lime jutting from the bottle's neck down into it, and toasted my reflection in the bar's mirror. *Here's to obscurity.*

To my left, a voice said my name. Mood instantly lightened, I turned on my stool, and saw Joel Martin—*Mr. Martin*, I couldn't help thinking. Junior year chemistry, senior year physics, assistant coach of the boys' junior varsity football and varsity basketball teams. Disgraced in the closing days of my senior year for an affair with Sinead McGahern, one of my classmates, which left her pregnant and him out of a job at which he had been a favorite. He looked terrible. His hair, thinning when I had sat in his classroom, had largely deserted his head, except for a few spots here and there where he had allowed it to grow long. The lenses of his glasses were scratched and scored, opaque in some places. The heavy five o'clock shadow that had always darkened his jaw had thickened to a heavy beard, which he appeared to have maintained without the benefit of a mirror.

Never a big man to begin with—I would have put his height at 5’5”, his weight at one forty—he seemed smaller inside his shapeless black suit, shrunken. A martini glass, full, stood on the bar in front of him.

I was stunned. In the weeks and months after graduation, Joel Martin’s situation had gone from scandal to ongoing catastrophe, ending with him in jail, first in Argentina, then locally. During my first couple of years of college, when I still met some of my high school friends at winter and summer breaks, the latest chapter in the ongoing saga of Mr. Martin and Sinead McGahern was among our immediate topics of conversation. As his actions had progressed—or declined—from the questionable to the out-and-out criminal, so had my mental image of him transformed from intense, affable science teacher to something darker, a seducer, a humiliated and desperate father. To encounter him here, looking different, yes, yet more threadbare than sinister, was a scenario I would not have anticipated. Which may have been why, when he held out his hand, I took it. His flesh was gritty, as if he had come directly from the beach without washing. I wondered if anyone else had identified him. Was Sinead here? I wasn’t sure. I hadn’t seen her, but had I seen everyone?

“How’ve you been?” he said.

“Good,” I said. It was the answer I would have given had any of the people I’d tried to talk to posed the question.

“What’re you up to these days?”

“Teaching,” I said. “I teach college.”

“Oh, yeah? Whereabouts?”

“SUNY Huguenot. Across the river.”

“That’s great,” he said, his voice full of its old enthusiasm. “What do they have you doing?”

“English,” I said. “Freshman writing, mostly.”

“Very nice. Say, you know what I’ve been sitting here trying to remember?”

“What?”

“The prank you guys pulled when you were juniors. Well, maybe ‘prank’ is too strong a word. No one got hurt or anything. Do you know what I’m

talking about?”

I did. “The ‘What the hell is that?’ routine.”

He snapped his fingers. “That’s it! Who came up with that?”

“No one. I mean, someone saw it on TV—*Saturday Night Live*, I think—and we decided to do it in school.”

Joel Martin was laughing now, albeit quietly. “What the hell is that?” he said. Keeping his hand close to his chest, he pointed at a spot above the bar’s mirror. “What the *hell* is that? What the hell *is* that? *What* the hell is *that*?” He lowered his finger. “You remember the time I joined you guys?”

I nodded. It had been our most successful staging of the bit.

“Long time ago,” he said. “Long, long time ago.”

With sudden and uncanny certainty, I knew that the man who had gotten me through both Regents Chemistry and Regents Physics was on the verge of broaching topics I had no desire to discuss. An emotion halfway to panic gripped me. I decided to forego finishing my beer and depart the reunion early. I was pretty much done already, wasn’t I? Joel Martin saw me withdrawing a ten from my pocket to cover my drink and tip. His eyes widened, but before he could open his mouth, I said, “I have to go. Have a good night,” and slid off my stool.

Excusing and pardoning myself, I navigated the groups and couples standing between me and the front door. The room had grown hot, stiflingly humid. The sports coat and turtleneck I’d opted for were too tight, constricting. I glanced back to see if Joel Martin was still at the bar. I couldn’t tell; there were too many people crowding the space.

Outside, the night air was blessedly cool. I pulled off my jacket, tugged my shirt out of my slacks. My car was in front of the restaurant, at the concrete divider separating the parking lot from the main road. I was unlocking the driver’s-side door when I heard my name shouted. I looked toward the Castle’s front door, and there was Joel Martin holding it open. I raised the hand holding my jacket in what I hoped was a noncommittal wave. From within the doorway, he called, “See you there tomorrow?”

I motioned with the jacket again, ducked inside my car, and almost broke the key off jamming it into the ignition. I was positive I was going to hear a

tap on my window and see my former teacher's smiling face leaning toward me. When I stole a look at the front door, however, it was, though still open, empty. It was as if I had just missed Joel Martin stepping away from it to return inside. I had the impression of something within the lighted rectangle, a cloud of dust or sand, but I was too relieved at my good fortune to pay much attention to it. I shifted into gear and drove out of the parking lot.

II

The following night, I spent the car ride from my apartment in Wiltwyck to the Poughkeepsie Tennis Club narrating Joel Martin's fall from grace to Linda, my date for the evening. She was a former girlfriend who had broken up with me in order to pursue a relationship with one of her professors at NYU. They had split when she became pregnant, and now she was the mother of a two-year-old daughter, Elaine, whose father had visitation rights alternating weekends and two weeks during the summer. She managed a bank in Wiltwyck and lived with her dad, a retired cop who spent his days watching his granddaughter. Long past our post-relationship bitterness, we had lunch every few weeks, trading news about our latest romantic prospects and complaining about our respective jobs. After my most recent relationship petered out, Linda had agreed to accompany me to my reunion dinner as, she said, a psychological investigation into the forces that had shaped me. While she might have anticipated a certain level of pre-event nervousness on my part, she was unprepared for the agitation that had hold of me—that had not released me since the previous night. We hadn't been on the road two minutes when she said, "All right. You better tell me what's going on with you."

The first part of the story was related quickly enough. Having lived her own version of it, Linda was less shocked than she might have been. "I take it things didn't work out between this guy and the student," she said.

"To put it mildly," I said. "From what I understand, Sinead's parents wanted to press charges against Martin—statutory rape, contributing to the delinquency of a minor. The problem was, she had turned eighteen the previous December, and both of them swore nothing had happened between

them until the end of January. I think her mom still wanted to go after him, legally speaking, but her dad was less gung-ho. This was the father of his first grandchild, and Martin was saying all the right things, how sorry he was, how much he loved Sinead, how he intended to do right by her and the baby. Plus, Sinead kept insisting she was in love with him. Eventually, her mom cooled off, especially when Martin proposed to Sinead at the end of the summer. That was the news in the fall, when I was home for Thanksgiving break. Mr. Martin and Sinead McGahern were engaged, with a wedding planned for sometime in the spring, after she'd had the baby and regained her shape. Martin had a job at a gas station, which sounded like a bit of a comedown after having taught high school, but maybe not. Supposedly, he was saving to rent a house for them."

"I want to say they didn't go through with the wedding," Linda said.

"No, they didn't. Sinead had the baby the day after Christmas, a little boy, Sean. Apparently, Martin was in love with the kid the moment he laid eyes on him. I heard that was part of what broke them apart. One look at his child—his son, right?—and he's all ready to settle down with Sinead and start working on baby number two. Her, not so much. She'd been accepted to Penrose, and they'd agreed to defer her admission for a year. This was something she was not willing to give up."

"Plus," Linda said, "the bloom was off the rose, for him as well as for her. You start seeing someone in secret like that, someone who's off-limits to you, who embodies, I don't know, a certain kind of authority for her, a certain kind of youthfulness for him, and let me tell you, it's pretty heady stuff. Forbidden fruit and all that. It doesn't take long, though, for the fruit to spoil. What they had was a fling. Their mistake was in trying to prolong it—which, I understand, they did because of the kid. They would've been better hiring lawyers and drawing up a custody agreement. Did they?"

"Eventually. By that time, things between them were pretty dire. Her second year at Penrose, Sinead moved into an apartment with the kid. It was near the college. Apparently, Penrose offered pretty good childcare for its students and faculty, and this was where little Sean spent a lot of his time. Too much, according to Martin. He accused Sinead of dumping the kid at daycare or on her parents. Said that, half the time, he didn't know where his

son was. On one occasion, he showed up to collect the baby, and Sinead was out; she'd left her new boyfriend in charge of Sean."

"Ouch."

"Yeah. Martin took her to court, but her parents hired a nasty lawyer for her, sicced him on Martin the way Sinead's mom had wanted to in the first place. From what I understand, he shredded Martin into tiny pieces. I guess the judge was pretty sympathetic to Sinead too. The upshot was, Martin's custody of Sean was limited to every other weekend; plus, he was put on the hook for all kinds of expenses in addition to child support."

"Could have been worse," Linda said.

"I'm sure," I said, "but Martin didn't see it that way. I don't know if he honestly believed Sinead wasn't taking proper care of their child, or if he was stung by losing the court case."

"Or both."

"Or both. Whatever the reason, he couldn't let things alone. So he came up with a plan. He bought a dime bag of weed—"

"He didn't."

"Yeah, he did. Sinead had a habit of leaving her car unlocked in front of her apartment. He intended to drop the bag under the driver's seat. Then, the next time she brought Sean to his place, he would just happen to notice the drugs. He would call the cops on her and, ultimately, gain leverage when it came to the kid. Unfortunately for him, Sinead's boyfriend looked out of the window at the exact moment Martin had her car door open and was bent down inside it. She called 911. There was a police car close enough to show up before Martin had driven away. A big scene ensued. The pot was discovered. Sinead and the boyfriend accused Martin of planting it, said they weren't into that kind of stuff. I gather they told the cops they could search the apartment if they didn't believe them. Martin still had on the gloves he'd worn to ensure he left no fingerprints. Combined with him having been seen inside Sinead's car… The cops took him to the station. I'm not clear what the charges were. Nothing too major. Sinead, though, used the incident to haul him back in front of the judge and have his contact with Sean reduced to one weekend a month."

“Well,” Linda said, “this isn’t the worst story I’ve ever heard.”

“There’s more.”

“More?”

“This part I didn’t learn about until a few years later. For about a week, it was front-page news. One or two of the TV stations out of the city covered it. You would think Martin’s brush with the law would have taught him a lesson—scared straight and all that. It didn’t. Or it did, but the lesson he learned wasn’t a good one. Since his more modest efforts at rectifying the situation had failed, he decided it was time for drastic action. The legal system had shown it was no friend to him—or that he couldn’t manipulate it the way he wanted—so it could be ignored. He started doing research online.”

“This isn’t some kind of murder-for-hire deal, is it?”

“No,” I said. “What Martin had decided to do was take his son and flee the country. He spent months setting it up. Fake documents, fake IDs, fake passports, not to mention enough money to tide him over until he could find a job. Finally, when Sinead needed him to take Sean for a long weekend, he put his plan into action. He left his apartment pretty much as it was except for his computer. He removed the hard drive, wiped it with a magnet, microwaved it, and dropped it in the Dumpster outside the building. He drove to Stewart, where he took a flight to Orlando. He made sure to tell anyone who would listen that he was taking his son on his first trip to Disney World.

“The two of them actually spent a day in Florida, but only so he could make himself up to look like the photo on his new passport. From Orlando, Martin and Sean boarded a flight to LAX, where they passed most of another day before catching a flight to Buenos Aires, via Miami.

“Once they were in Argentina, he hung around Buenos Aires for a week, until he talked himself into a position as a tutor for the children of a cattle baron somewhere in the south of the country. That was where he was when the cops caught up to him three months later. He had done a good job at disguising himself and even the kid, but he was still a single man traveling with a young child. As soon as the cops figured out his new appearance, it was mostly a matter of sifting through hours of video from airport security

cameras to reconstruct the route he'd taken. The way the papers presented it, he didn't try to escape when the police arrived. He knew they had him. Sean was taken to Buenos Aires, where Sinead and her parents were waiting for him. Martin was thrown into an Argentine prison; although he lucked out—a little, anyhow. The guy whose kids he'd been tutoring liked him and had enough connections to have his sentence reduced from five years to nine months. The minute Martin was released, however, he was back on a plane to the United States, where his actions earned him another eighteen months behind bars."

"Holy shit," Linda said. "What happened to him after?"

"I don't know," I said. "I assume he got out and went about trying to put his life back together. From the way he looked last night, I don't think that's gone so well for him."

For a long moment, the two of us were silent. On either side of the street, large, well-kept houses signaled their owners' wealth. We were almost at the tennis club.

Linda said, "The things we do for love."

"Or revenge."

"You don't think he loves his son?"

"I'm sure he does. I'm also sure he hates his son's mother."

"Hmm. Was she there last night?"

"I don't think so. I didn't see her."

"Do you know if she'll be at this thing tonight?"

"I haven't the foggiest. We weren't exactly close in high school."

"All of a sudden," Linda said, "things have become much more interesting."

III

The second night of the reunion was in many ways like the first, with better food and with everyone in semiformal wear. At the entrance to the ballroom in which the dinner dance was being held, the reunion committee had set up a long table on which name tags had been laid in alphabetical rows. In

addition to our names, the IDs of my former classmates and me bore wallet-sized reproductions of our senior portraits. As I pinned mine to my jacket, I let my eyes drift over the remaining badges but did not see Sinead McGahern's. There were also name tags for a handful of former teachers, but Joel Martin's name was not among them.

Linda and I were seated with a group of people with whom I had been friendly during senior year. One of the guys had taken over the family business, a sit-down Chinese restaurant at which his wife had been a hostess. Another guy was not long out of the Air Force, and not long married to the young woman with him, who kept expressing her concern over their daughter, who I gathered was only a couple of months old and being watched by his mother. I asked the restaurateur if he'd kept track of a few of my favorite teachers; he said he wasn't positive, but he thought they were dead. I asked the ex-Air Force guy what he was up to now; he said he was managing a Radio Shack in eastern Massachusetts. During these exchanges, something that had occurred to me the previous night became clear. Of the people with whom I would have considered myself especially close during my four years at Our Lady of Fatima, not one had opted to attend our reunion. Who knew where they were? (I tried the restaurant guy; to each of their names, he said he wasn't sure, but he thought he'd heard of a number of personal catastrophes including drugs, prison, serious injury, and devastating illness.)

This left me at an event like a restaging of my senior prom, complete with all the songs and dance moves that had not aged particularly well. Linda actually seemed to be enjoying herself. She had managed a Chinese place in Albany at one point, and her father had been in the Air Force, so she was able to maintain conversations with both of my former classmates. About halfway through the event, the DJ—a local celebrity who anchored the morning show on the classic rock station and had been a couple of years ahead of us in school—announced that it was time to read the memories people had written on the slips of paper provided at each table. (I had chosen not to.) In the midst of recollections about specific teachers' classes, and sporting victories, and trips here and there, someone contributed a note that read, "I had sex with one of my teachers." I felt as if someone had thrown a bucket of ice water over me. I'm not certain what response I

anticipated from the rest of the audience, but the most the confession received was a scattering of laughs and a couple of approving howls. Linda gave me a significant glance. Had someone else slept with Joel Martin? Or, God help me, had one of my old classmates had an affair with another teacher? Yes, it was naïve to be this shocked, but so what? Apparently, I hadn't left my younger self as far behind as my appearance might have suggested.

I was not expecting Joel Martin to show himself at this night's festivities, not really. It was one thing to chance slipping into a room packed with people busy with one another and sitting with your back to them while you sipped from your cocktail. It was altogether another to stroll into a ballroom whose tablefuls of your former students would have little trouble identifying you. All the same, when I turned from the urinal in the men's room and saw him standing against the door, the phrase that almost escaped my lips was "Of course." It was as if that anonymous admission had summoned him here. I couldn't imagine what he would want with me. I crossed to one of the sinks and washed my hands.

"Nice place, this," he said.

"Yes," I said, "it is."

"You ever been here before?"

"No. First time."

"I was. Years ago. One of the senior classes a few years ahead of you guys had their prom here. I was a chaperone; brought my girlfriend at the time. This was—you would have been a freshman. Yeah, freshman."

I finished drying my hands, dropped the paper towel in the trash. "I should be getting back. My date—"

"I guess you heard about my… troubles," he said. "Yeah, you did. Who didn't? Especially after they were all over the front page of the Goddamned papers."

He was right; there was no point denying it. I nodded. "I did."

"Do you have any kids of your own?"

"No."

“Let me tell you, once you do, you will not believe you could love anyone that much. You look at this little wrinkled creature, its arms and legs still tucked up from being in the womb, and it is love at first sight. There is nothing you will not do for this kid. Your entire focus shifts from whatever bullshit you thought was important to making sure this child—your child—is okay. All the things you couldn’t imagine doing—changing dirty diapers, dealing with spit-up, waking up in the middle of the night to rock them back to sleep—become the order of the day. Do you understand what I’m saying to you?”

“I do.”

“Everything I did, every last bit of it, was for my son, to keep him safe, to give him the kind of life he deserved. I have always wanted what was best for him. Always. I never stopped wanting that, even when I was locked up in Argentina, or when I came back here so they could lock me up some more. My son’s mother had taken him and left. She didn’t leave word where. Didn’t ask for child support from me, in case it allowed me to trace them. Was that fair? I ask you, was any of that fair?”

“I don’t know,” I said. “I guess she felt—”

“It doesn’t matter,” Joel Martin said. “While I was in prison in Buenos Aires, I met a guy who let me in on something that is going to get my son back and make certain no one takes him from me again.”

“I’m not—”

“Do you know who Borges was?”

“The writer?”

“This guy I met was a friend of his. That’s what they called him, the other prisoners, the Friend of Borges, *el amigo de Borges*. He’d hung out with Borges when he was younger, at university. He was a mathematician, into some pretty exotic stuff. There was this one story Borges had written, ‘The Aleph’—have you read it?”

“The one about the point that lets you see all other points in space and time.”

“Exactly. The guy was fascinated by that story, by the math underlying it. Poincaré theory—how well do you remember physics class?”

“Not at all.”

“That’s disappointing,” he said, “but it isn’t important. The conversations with Borges took the guy only so far, but the writer put him in touch with one of his friends at the university, who gave him the name of another person, and so on, until he met with a group who were familiar with the theory underlying the aleph, and a lot more besides.”

“Okay.”

“You don’t get it. That’s all right. Do you recall me telling you guys that everything was just math?”

“Yes.”

“You thought I was talking figuratively—if you gave it any thought at all. I wasn’t. The group the Friend of Borges met understood this. They comprehended it. They were part of a… tradition of scholars who had been working with this exotic math for a long time. Like, longer than you’d believe.”

“I’m not—”

“These scholars had figured out all kinds of applications for the material they were studying. They had worked out how to employ it, using combinations of words and sounds and… mental images, you could call them.”

“It sounds like you’re talking about magic.”

“What you call it isn’t important. What’s important is that it works.”

“Then why was this guy—the Friend of Borges—in prison? Couldn’t he just magic his way out of there, teleport or something?”

“He was in hiding,” Joel Martin said. “Or, that’s not it, exactly. He’d had a falling-out with the other members of his lodge, and he had decided to secure himself within Unit 1.”

“Couldn’t he have found a better place to hide out?”

“That doesn’t matter!” he shouted. “You’re missing the Goddamned forest for the trees. I’m telling you I met the modern-day equivalent of fucking Merlin, and you want to know why he isn’t staying at the Hilton. Jesus!”

There was no doubt in my mind that my former teacher had traveled far, far around the proverbial bend. I raised my hands, palms out. “Okay. I’m sorry. You met the Friend of Borges, and he told you about this weird math. Did he teach any of it to you?”

“A little. You can appreciate, the conditions weren’t ideal for this kind of instruction. What he did was to tell me where I needed to go once I was free to travel again. Which took a while, and I had to work a bunch of shit jobs to save up the money, but in the end, I got there.”

I couldn’t help myself. “Where was it?”

“Quebec.”

“Quebec?”

“Quebec City. That’s where the nearest lodge—the nearest school is.”

“And they took you in—accepted you as their student.”

“They did.”

“So now you’re one of them, a… mathematician.”

“Basically.”

“But—why are you here? If you have access to the aleph, or whatever, shouldn’t you be using it to track down your son?”

Joel Martin’s face drew in on itself, to an expression it took me a moment to name: embarrassment. He looked down at his shoes, stuffed his hands into his jacket pockets. “There’s been a slight complication.”

Here it comes, I thought, *the escape hatch, the detail that allows the fantasy to exist yet remain ineffectual.* “Oh? What kind of complication?”

“I’m imprisoned. The master of the lodge guards his knowledge jealously. He doesn’t introduce you to new material until he’s satisfied that you’re ready for it. I had passed all the basic tests with flying colors. Everyone said I was one of the best students they’d taught in years. They—the master wanted me to wait before studying anything more advanced. I was sure I didn’t need to. I was eager—I could feel time slipping away from me. Every day, and my son is getting older, whatever memories he has of me growing fainter. Have no doubt, his mother and whoever she’s with are doing all they can to erase me from his life. I needed access to the aleph

now. I pressed the matter with the master. He wouldn't budge. Things got heated between us. I made some… intemperate remarks. The master invited me to act on them. I did. It didn't go well. When the dust settled, he trapped me in a place… It's kind of a place between places. He said if I could figure my way out of it, I might be ready to start learning again."

"You're in prison," I said.

"Imprisoned," he said. "Again. It's more complicated than the other lockups I've been in. There's a limited amount of energy sustaining the cell. I can draw on it, but every time I do, the space constricts. If I had accepted my sentence, I could remain here indefinitely. But I told you I can't do that. I have to get out of here. I tried reaching out to one of the other students at the lodge, someone I thought was sympathetic to me. I was wrong, and I shrank the prison. I decided I had to think more creatively—outside the box, ha-ha. It occurred to me that your ten-year reunion was coming up. I was able to find out the times and locations without making the cell too much smaller."

"Wait," I said. "You're in this cell."

"Correct."

"Yet you're standing here talking to me."

"This," he said, removing his hands from his pockets to gesture at himself, "is a simulacrum. It's as if you're talking to me on a videophone."

"Okay," I said. "Couldn't you appear to your son, then? Why waste time with me?"

"Because I don't know where he is. I was able to draw on your memories—your class's combined memories of me to locate this spot and assemble a version of myself. I reached out to you in particular because we'd gotten along when you were my student. I hoped you would be willing to help me."

"How could I help you?"

"I have a storage unit on Route 9, down by the malls. There are a couple of things in there, a book and—"

"Mr. Martin," I said. "Joel." At the sound of his name, his head jerked, as if I had slapped him. I said, "I don't know what's going on with you, exactly,

but I wonder if maybe you need to talk to someone who could help you with all this."

"What do you mean?" he said. "That's why I'm—oh." His eyes narrowed. "I get it. You think I'm delusional. Paranoid schizophrenia, right?"

"It sounds as if you've been under a tremendous amount of stress," I said. "Things with your son—"

"Don't you understand? There are no 'things with my son.' I don't know where he is. As long as I'm stuck in this prison—"

"Stop. You're in the men's room of the Poughkeepsie Tennis Club. You are not in some kind of magic jail."

"You have no idea," he said. "You have no Goddamned idea. This place is a blank. It isn't a place, properly speaking. It *isn't*; do you understand? It's the white between the letters on the page. Most of the time, it's all I can do to keep myself coherent. And on top of that, it's getting *smaller*. It may have reached its limit. Any more loss of energy, and it's going to collapse and take me with it. I am not shitting you when I say that you are my last chance. I'm doing everything I can to hold on, but time is running out."

A tremendous pity rose in me. I had been in here much too long. "I have to go," I said. "I'm sorry." I walked toward the bathroom door.

"What? Hey, hang on." He put his hands up.

"Please get out of the way."

"Wait—"

I was expecting Joel Martin to move to the side. If he didn't, I had a good half a foot and probably seventy-five pounds on him. Should it prove necessary, I had no doubt I'd be able to muscle past him.

When his outstretched fingers touched me, however, there was a sound like a houseful of windows shattering. Something like a blast of air shoved me across the bathroom, into the wall. Stunned, I looked at Joel Martin. The air around him appeared to have dimmed. He seemed to have lost substance, to have flattened. As I watched, he began to crumple, as if he were made of paper and a pair of giant hands were crushing him between them. His mouth was open; he was saying, "No, oh, no no no no," over and over again. The words sounded as if they were reaching me from across a vast

gulf. He tried to reach out in my direction, but the force that was compressing the rest of him collapsed his arms against him. Eyes wide with pain, he alternated his noes with his son's name. His shoulders gave; his legs folded up to his torso. "Wait!" he shouted, his voice further away still. "Wait! Wait!" His body bent inward, condensing itself. As his face began to crumple, he screamed, a howl of rage and frustration.

Then he was gone, and the air was full of swirling dust. Coughing, I raised my hands to my face. My eyes teared. It seemed I could hear Joel Martin screaming still, or maybe that was only the whine of the fluorescent lights. I coughed so hard, it doubled me over. The dust had triggered an asthma attack. I pulled myself up on one of the sinks and saw in the mirror a man whose scarlet face was streaked with tears and dust. For a moment, I remembered standing beside Joel Martin, the two of us vibrating with barely suppressed laughter, as we pointed at a corner of the hallway ceiling and said to one another, "What the hell is that?"

Before the dust had finished settling onto the fixtures, the floor, I fled the bathroom, half running down the dark hallway back to the ballroom. Everywhere except the dance floor, the lights had been lowered. On the dance floor, men and women wearing the disinterested expressions of funeral statuary swayed and shuffled to the Talking Heads' "Road to Nowhere" thundering from the speakers like a demented march. Those seated in the shadows bobbed their heads in time to the beat.

Another round of coughing shook me. No one could hear it over the music. Hand covering my mouth, I stumbled to my table, where I was relieved to find Linda seated. She smiled when she saw me, but her brows lowered as I leaned over for a fresh bout of coughing. My head was spinning. I straightened, listed to the right, and Linda was there to steady me. Leaning close, she shouted, "What is it?"

I managed to say, "Asthma," loud enough for her to hear.

She nodded, said, "Do you have an inhaler?"

I shook my head.

"Is it bad?" she said. "Do you need to go to the emergency room?"

I shook my head again.

“Do you want me to drive you home?”

I nodded.

“Okay. Let me tell everyone what’s going on.”

This Linda did, drawing concerned looks and waves from the rest of the table. I returned the waves, but kept my distance. On the way out of the tennis club, we passed a man and a woman arguing. He was severely drunk, seated on the lowest of the front steps, his tie yanked to one side, his shirt half unbuttoned. She was standing in her stocking feet, using her flat pocketbook to punctuate the points she was making. The two of them had been among the popular crowd at Fatima, not homecoming king and queen but certainly part of their court. I was grateful another round of coughing took me as Linda and I walked by them, so I could pretend I wasn’t aware they were enacting what appeared to be a fairly regular drama.

By the time Linda pulled into the parking lot in front of my apartment building, the worst of my asthma attack was over. It had prevented much conversation on the ride back, except for me to say that it had been triggered by something in the air in the men’s room. As she handed me the keys, Linda said, “Are you going to be okay by yourself? Because I can stay over if you need me to.”

“It’s all right,” I said. “I’ll be fine. Thank you.”

“Call me if you get worse.”

“I will, but really, I’m fine. I’ll use my inhaler the second I walk in the door.”

“You’d better.”

I did. And since I knew there was no chance of me falling asleep anytime in what seemed like the next several days, I took down the bottle of Talisker from the top of the refrigerator and poured myself three fingers, whose effects I did not feel. I carried the bottle and glass into the living room, where I set them on the side table and found the TV remote. The nighttime channels were full of all manner of weird and pathetic programming, but together with the scotch, they were almost enough to keep me from dwelling on Joel Martin’s expression while his prison crushed him, on his calling his son’s name, on his final plea for a reprieve that was not granted.

Eventually, I drank enough of the whiskey for it drop me into a black, empty place.

IV

When I received the e-mail invitation to my twenty-fifth high school reunion, I'll admit I considered responding to it. Enough time had elapsed for me to hope that my classmates and I might finally have moved beyond our differences. Instead, what I discovered, after a couple of messages to old friends found again through social media, was that there were two reunions being planned, one for the former elites of my class and the other for the rest of us. I was sufficiently disgusted by the news to delete my invitation, washing my hands of the business of high school reunions for at least another quarter-century.

My decision was influenced as well by information that came to me at almost exactly the same time via the same social media connections. One of those old friends sent me a message asking if I'd heard the news about Sean McGahern, the kid of Sinead McGahern and Mr. Martin. I replied that I hadn't. She forwarded me a link to a story about the tragic death of the young singer-songwriter whose first album, *Possession with Intent*, had won him critical acclaim and a Grammy nomination. The record chronicled his life growing up as the child of a narcissistic mother, an uninterested stepfather, and a father who appeared to have vanished off the face of the Earth. (I thought about that locker on Route 9, the one I'd considered checking into but never had.) Emotional and psychological difficulties had led him to experiment first with pot, then heroin, to which he had become addicted. For a brief period of time, while he was working on his album, he seemed to have put his addiction behind him. The pressures of touring to support it, however, combined with those of producing his follow-up effort, had sent him back to heroin. He had died of an overdose; there was some question whether it was an accident or suicide.

After closing the link, I had to stand up and walk away from the computer. I had to leave my office, within the buzz of whose fluorescent light I heard another sound, high-pitched, impossibly distant: Joel Martin, screaming—still screaming—for all he had lost, all he had given away.

Mirror Fishing

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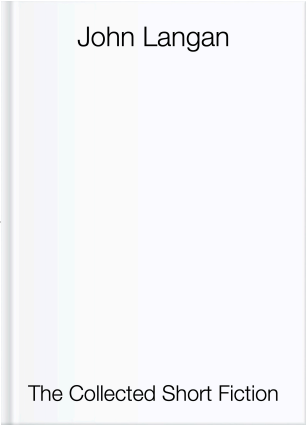

Four feet tall by a foot and a half wide, framed in blond wood, the mirror hung on the inside of Patrick and his younger brother's bedroom door. His father had positioned the glass rectangle a couple of inches from the bottom of the door, which for the longest time had allowed him and Davis to check their school uniforms in it each morning. During the past year, however, Pat had started a growth spurt that had left him six inches taller at the end of seventh grade than he had been at the beginning. Now the top of his reflection's head was no longer visible unless Pat bent his knees. Dad had been talking about adjusting the height for the last couple of months, but had yet to act on his plans.

Lisa grasped the mirror on either side, a bit above the halfway point, and lifted it free of the nails supporting the heavy wire strung across its back. She stepped away from the closed door, toward Pat's bed, pirouetting to navigate the foot of the bed. With the room's lights off, the only illumination was slices of late-afternoon sunlight that slid around the edges of the drawn blinds, picking out random details on the posters hung on the room's walls, the Bionic Man's gleaming left eye, a glittering sleeve on one of the Beatles' Sergeant Pepper jackets. Pat opened his mouth to tell Lisa to be careful, but she maneuvered through the dim space without difficulty. She lowered the mirror, glass-side up, onto the carpeted alley separating his bed from his brother's, straightened, and climbed onto Davis's bed, seating herself in the middle of it, cross-legged.

Pat was already sitting on his bed in the same fashion. Beside him lay the simplified fishing pole his older cousin Carol's friend had handed him, a slender stick stripped of bark to whose end a length of string had been tied. Pat had followed Lisa's instructions and secured the other end of the fishing line to an object of importance to him, the three-and-a-half-inch metal figure of Dangard Ace, which he was too old to play with, but which he

kept on his side of the nightstand for good luck. Lisa raised the fishing pole on Davis's blanket. Squinting, Pat saw that its lure was a plastic ring in the shape of a wolf's head. She caught the ring, held it up for him to examine. The color was faded halfway to white, the plastic worn.

"I got this at a fair when I was a kid," she said, pronouncing each word in the careful accent that Pat thought of as English, and that Lisa referred to as BBC standard. "My parents bought it for me. My sister was there, too, and she also got a ring. Hers was an ape's head. I think it was. Its forehead was high and bald. It almost looked like a man, a horrible old man. Sara's ring was mustard-colored. Did I tell you my sister's name was Sara? She wanted my ring; I could tell. But I had seen it first and asked my parents if I could have it. It was the only one of its kind, so Sara had to pick her old, mustardy ape. She pretended she was happy with her choice, but I knew better. I knew she would find a way to make a try for my ring.

"She waited until the car ride home, when there was no chance of us returning to the fair. Her ring broke, she said. The lower part of the band snapped. *How did that happen?* I wondered. She made an awful fuss. My father glanced at me in the rearview mirror. My mother looked over her shoulder at me. Neither of them spoke a word. Eventually, I sighed and twisted the ring from my finger. *Oh thank you thank you thank you*, Sara said. *Are you sure it's all right? Yes*, I said, because what else was there for me to say? My parents made approving noises.

"Can you guess what happened next? You can, can't you? You've got siblings. A short while later—it couldn't have been more than two or three weeks—I found the ring, *my* ring, in the drawer of Sara's desk. I can't recall what I was searching for in there. It was a repository for junk, where my sister tossed things in which she'd lost interest. Including the ring she'd made such a fuss to gain from me. Really, I shouldn't have been surprised. My sister always was a bit of a magpie, flitting from one bright, shiny object to the next. But the sight of the ring lying there made me furious. I snatched it up, and ran back to my room with it. I hid it in a wooden box behind the encyclopedias on the lower shelf of my bookcase. (This was where I kept my most precious possessions.)

"Probably, I could have waited another couple of weeks and started wearing it, and Sara wouldn't have noticed. My parents would have,

though, and they would have forced me to return the ring to my sister, no matter how much I protested. Sara would have taken it all over again, just to make a point. So I kept the ring hidden. Sometimes, I took it out and wore it if I was by myself and unlikely to be disturbed, which generally meant when I was doing homework. I found it deeply satisfying to lie on my bed wearing my ring, while the next room over, my sister went about her business, unaware that I had taken back what was mine.

"And when I learned about mirror-fishing—what I want to show you—I had my lure right at hand." Before Pat could ask her the circumstances under which she had been taught this game, Lisa said, "Now, what about you? What have you got on the end of your line? A robot?"

"It's a Shogun Warrior," Pat said, hating how juvenile the name sounded. "They were toys when I was a kid. From Japan. They were supposed to be giant robots who protected the Earth. Each one was hundreds of feet tall. They could fly, shoot rockets and lasers, even change into other forms. They were the biggest toys my brother and I ever got, like, two feet tall. There were three of them, to start with, then the company brought out more. There was a comic, too. It was about three people who got picked to pilot the robots by the last survivor of the group that built them. There was a guy from America, a guy from Madagascar, and a woman from Japan. You could tell the American was supposed to be the favorite. He was a stuntman, a real devil-may-care character. I preferred the guy from Madagascar. He was a scientist, a marine biologist. His Shogun Warrior was named Dangard Ace. Not only did his robot look cool, it could transform into the Dreadnought, which was a kind of heavy-duty attack ship.

"The only problem was, Dangard Ace wasn't available in large size. The only way you could get him was as part of a line of smaller die-cast figures. They came in these boxes that were about the size of a deck of playing cards. Davis got one for his birthday, and there was a piece of paper folded up with it that showed all the Shogun Warriors that came in that size. Dangard Ace was one of them. I looked everywhere for him, every toy store we went to, every store that had a toy section, but I never found him. Maybe it was because of the comic; maybe lots of people wanted a Dangard Ace. Then the comic was cancelled. I don't know why. I liked it. My friends

liked it. For a while after, you could still find the toys, but not as many. Eventually, you couldn't find any.

"This past May, though—it was after my Confirmation. I had some money; my family had given me a lot when I was Confirmed. My parents made me put most of it in the bank, but they let me keep a little out to spend. I was at the mall. I guess I assumed I'd buy something at one of the bookstores, but I wanted to look around. There's something about walking through a store, knowing you have money in your pocket … I don't know. Anyway, I went into KayBee Toy and Hobby, and what did I find on the end of the action figure aisle? A whole bunch of the die-cast Shogun Warriors. The boxes were battered, torn in a couple of cases. They had bright orange discount stickers on them. What must have happened was, someone found a crate of the figures in the warehouse that was supposed to have been returned a long time ago; they panicked, and sent the toys out to be sold cheap.

"There was just about a complete set of them. For a moment, I wanted to buy all of them. I could have, too. I had enough cash. But I didn't. I could imagine what my parents would say if I told them I'd spent my money on a bunch of toys. The exception was Dangard Ace. I couldn't resist getting him, not after all that time searching for and not finding him. It was only one toy, and not a very big one. My dad gave me a look like he couldn't believe I'd spent my money on *this*, and my mom smiled in a way that said I wasn't so grown-up, after all. I didn't care. Well, I did, but not enough to return Dangard. I keep him on the nightstand. He's … I tell people he's for good luck."

"But he's more than that, isn't he?" Lisa said. She held the tip of her fishing pole out over the space between the beds, above the mirror, and released the ring. It swung out toward Pat, back toward Lisa, out to Pat, the arc of its swing rapidly diminishing. Pat watched it twist as it pendulumed. "He's a sign," Lisa said. She dipped the rod, lowering the ring to its reflection. "An emblem of desire." The ring tacked on the glass.

"Desire?" Pat said. His mouth was suddenly dry. His cousin's friend was attractive: her fine features always made up, her slender limbs tanned bronze, her choice of clothes tending in the direction of short-shorts and crop-tops. At the same time, she was nineteen, older than the babysitter his parents continued to employ for him and his siblings when they went out

for their monthly date night. She and his cousin, Carol, occupied a position that, while not quite equal to that of his parents (to whom both visitors were respectful, deferential), was decidedly removed from that of Pat, Davis, and their sisters. To think of Lisa as anything other than remote as Farah Fawcett smiling down from his friends' bedroom walls felt vertiginous. Especially since his parents, Davis, and his sisters had taken Carol to the mall, leaving Lisa in charge of him. She had mentioned this activity, mirror-fishing, that she wished to share with him, and he had assumed it was a game from her pre-teen days she wanted to revisit. Which was fine. He enjoyed her company, and was willing to indulge her nostalgia. That she might have something else in mind—he wasn't sure what, only that it involved desire, one of those words which wasn't quite dirty, but which dragged the corners of his parents' mouths down every time it was pronounced—was a prospect that filled him with a trembling emotion either terror or joy or both.

"Wanting," Lisa said. Before Pat could say that he knew what the word meant, she pointed at his fishing rod and said, "Your turn."

He leaned forward for a better view of Dangard Ace as he brought the figure to the mirror. "You wanted," Lisa said. "You wanted the toy—*this* toy—and you cast that desire out into the world. Like a fisherman, casting a lure to attract the fish he wants. And what happened? You caught your fish. You got what you wanted."

The Shogun Warrior clinked on the glass. Although arguing with her was the last thing he desired, he couldn't help saying, "Eventually," as he laid the fishing pole on the bed.

"Well, yes, that's the problem, isn't it? We fling our wanting away from us—it's as if we're using children's poles to fish the ocean. Or something. I don't know that much about proper fishing, actually. Do you?"

"Not really."

"You understand what I'm getting at, though? We want, and sometimes our wanting brings us what we want. But we don't know how it does—if it does. Suppose we could? Suppose there was a way to focus your desire, to make it more effective. What would you do then?"

"How would that work?"

“To start with, you need a mirror.”

“And then?”

“You call on Auld Glaikit.”

“Owald—what?”

Lisa laughed. “That’s what my grandfather called him. It. Auld Glaikit. It’s Scots, like your parents. It means Old Silly, or Old Stupid. Not very nice, is it? It sounds like the name of what you’re calling—close enough. You don’t want to pronounce its actual name, so you use Auld Glaikit, instead.”

“Why don’t you want to say the real name?”

“Because it would get you hanged as a witch, back when such things still happened.”

“What—is it another name for the Devil?” The possibility that Lisa wanted him to participate in some kind of occult activity—something Satanic, like a Black Mass—hadn’t occurred to Pat. He knew kids at school who had played around with Ouija boards, a few of whom claimed to have felt a presence sliding the planchette across the board. His religion teacher had frowned at these reports, reminding the class that *The Exorcist* movie was based on a true story, and warning them that Lucifer and his angels were always on the lookout for an opportunity to seize control of a soul insufficiently cautious. The excitement fizzing in him flattened.

“No,” Lisa said. “No, it’s not the Devil. It’s more of a—like a spirit.”

“A ghost?”

“More like a fairy.”

“A fairy?”

The tone of his voice drew a laugh from his cousin’s friend. “Not like Tinkerbell. Fairies were beings of extraordinary power and beauty. They resembled angels, except, they lived in their own kingdom and went about their own affairs. Most of the time, what we, women and men, did was of no concern to them. Every once in a while, though, one of them would become interested in us, and then, there was no telling what would happen.”

“So Auld Glaikit is one of these fairies.”

“Kind of. A fairy from far, far away.”

“Another country?”

“Another universe.”

“How?”

“I don’t know. My grandfather said it came through the Big Bang, but he couldn’t explain it very well. Or I couldn’t understand it. It traveled in a beam of light.”

“Like a transporter.”

“Could be. The people who saw it arrive here, on Earth, thought it was a meteor. They were wrong.”

“Where did it land?”

“A lake in England. Only, it didn’t land in the lake.”

“What happened to it?”

“It went into the reflection on the water’s surface. Into that … space.”

“That’s why you wanted the mirror.”

“Exactly,” Lisa said. “You are a smart one.”

Pat felt his cheeks redden.

“All reflections open on the same territory. You can reach Auld Glaikit through any of them.”

“With these,” Pat said, nodding at the fishing pole.

“Look,” Lisa said, gesturing at the mirror.

Dangard Ace was moving on the glass, slowly rotating, head down, feet up. The angle at which the figure was positioned didn’t make any sense, until Pat’s eyes adapted and he understood that he was seeing the toy within the mirror. It was as if the surface had been composed of transparent ice, which had melted, dropping his improbable lure into the water underneath. He inhaled sharply, saw that Lisa’s blue ring was submerged inches away from the robot. Below the pair of objects, the mirror’s depths were full of flickering silver light. Pat had the impression of gazing into liquid not quite water, more viscous. He raised his eyes to Lisa, who was grinning. “How are you doing this?” he said.

“The things you want—I mean really and truly desire—fill up with that wanting. They hold it, like a charge. Under the proper conditions, this allows them to cross into the mirror.”

“What happens next?”

“We wait, and prepare ourselves.”

“For…?”

“For Auld Glaikit.”

“What do we do when it shows up?”

“If it answers our call, then we can ask something of it.”

“Like, a wish?”

Lisa nodded. “What is it you want, more than anything? Not another toy, surely.”

“No,” Pat said. “What do *you* want?”

“Haven’t you ever heard you’re not supposed to tell your wishes, or they won’t come true?”

“Yeah,” Pat said, although he’d thought the prohibition confined to birthday-cake candles and shooting stars.

“Concentrate on what you’d like the most. Close your eyes. See it. Feel it.”

Self-conscious as it made him, Pat shut his eyes. What did he desire more than anything else? His mind’s eye was blank. Across from him, he heard Davis’s bed creak as Lisa adjusted her position on it. The coconut odor of her suntan lotion filled his nostrils. The hair on his arms, his legs, tickled.

“Can you picture it?” Lisa said. “Can you imagine what you want?”

“Yes,” Pat said. A toy? That sounded pretty juvenile for what was happening in front of him. Diane Abbot? She was the girl on whose desk he’d left a heart-shaped box of chocolates on Valentine’s Day, and a chocolate Easter Egg a couple of months later, but to whom he’d been unable to utter a single syllable. Should he wish for her to like him? What about Clark Figg and Joe Weisskopf? Of all the kids in his class who teased him, which was most of them, Clark and Joe were the worst, the ones whose taunts combined venom and delight most cuttingly. Often enough, he’d fantasized punching Clark in his smug, self-satisfied face, kicking Joe

in the nuts hard enough to drive them halfway up his chest. Would a wish best be spent revenging himself on them? Or Lisa—she was willing to share this secret with him: maybe there was more she would share.

"Look!"

He opened his eyes. Lisa had flattened onto her stomach, to allow her an unobstructed view down into the mirror. Pat did likewise. "What is it?"

"It's coming," Lisa said.

"Really?" He peered into the mirror's shimmering vista. Shadowy shapes rose and fell and tumbled around one another, tricks of the shifting light. In what appeared to be the middle distance, long black threads drifted from right to left. "I don't see anything. What does it look like?"

"There."

"Where?"

"*There.*"

She was talking, Pat realized, about the black lines, which curved and looped as if caught by invisible currents. "Those?" he said. "What are they?"

"They're like fishing lines."

"It's fishing for us?"

"No," Lisa said. "Not exactly. They're searching out our desire."

"What do you mean?"

"Isn't it obvious?"

Actually, it was. "They're Auld Glaikit."

"They are. A part of it, anyway." She glanced over at him, her eyes shining with the mirror's pale light. "We did it. We brought it here."

"We did," Pat said, wishing the affirmation filled him with more confidence. "What happens now?"

"Now," Lisa said, "we go swimming." She pushed herself to sitting, then extended her legs over the side of the bed, scooting forward until she was balanced on the mattress's edge, her toes inches above the mirror. Using her elbows for support, she eased her feet, then her shins, then her knees, into

the glass, as if she were lowering into a pool of cold water, allowing her skin to adjust to the temperature. “Come on.”

Pat was far from the world’s most able or enthusiastic swimmer, the consequence of a number of dunkings he’d received from his father and one of his uncles when he was younger. The prospect of submerging in a pool of who-knew-what was enough to set his heart racing, slick his palms with sweat. “How do you breathe?” he said.

Lisa was in to her shoulders. “It’s not really swimming,” she said. She raised an arm to view. It was dry. “See? It’s more like floating. Come try it.”

Already, the situation had moved from shared childhood memory to nowhere Pat had imagined being, let alone been. While the supernatural was not unfamiliar, conceptually speaking, his practical experience of it was limited to the consecration at Sunday mass, where, to be frank, you had to take it on faith that the host had been transubstantiated. This … Lisa moved to the other end of the rectangle, to permit him more room to enter it. He maneuvered off his bed until he was standing on the carpet at the mirror’s head. He lifted his left foot and placed it on the wood frame. By raising his heel, he could dip his toes into the glass. He was aware of the slightest resistance, and his foot was through. The medium didn’t feel like water; it didn’t feel like much of anything. Cooler than the air in his room, maybe, though not by much. He bent his right knee so he could immerse the rest of his foot. Below his foot—he couldn’t say how far, exactly: fifty feet? a hundred?—a trio of the black threads was spiraling upwards in slow motion. He looked at Lisa, who was watching him, expectantly. “I can’t believe this,” he said.

“I know,” she said, “isn’t it amazing? The first time my grandfather showed it to me, I was sure he was playing a trick on me. He wasn’t. This isn’t all of it, either.”

“All right,” Pat said. He sat on the carpet, letting both his legs drop within the mirror. Bracing himself on his arms, he swung his torso inside. Now that he was almost entirely surrounded by the medium, he was aware of a slight buoyancy to it, as if it was supporting him. Holding onto the frame, he descended to his chin. The sensation of floating was more pronounced. To his right, Dangard Ace rocked from side to side. Maintaining his hold on

the frame with his left hand, he reached out his right to the figure. His fingers brushed the smooth metal, the braided clothesline knotted around it.

"Careful," Lisa said.

Pat withdrew his hand. "What?"

"That little robot and my ring are keeping this doorway opened. Remove either one of them, and it closes."

"What happens then?"

"If we're on the other side of it, we're stuck there. If we're in it …"

"Part of us is stuck there."

"And the rest remains here. Rather messy, you can imagine. So let's not let that happen, shall we?"

"Agreed."

"Good. Now that's out of the way, let's go say hello to our visitor." With that, Lisa ducked her head under the glass. Pat watched her drop into its silver depths with the slow motion of a leaf traversing the gap between branch and ground. She turned her face to him, calling a, "Hurry up!" that seemed to reach him from far away.

There was no way for him to talk himself into this. If he was going to join Lisa, he had to release his grip on the frame and fall. Before he could second-guess the decision, he opened his hands.

The surface of the mirror contracted over the top of his head, and it seemed to be this motion that propelled him into the place on the other side of it, as if he were a seed being squeezed out of a slice of orange. Around him, wisps and ribbons of silver hung like decorations. Further off, thicker patches of whiteness drifted in slow schools. Further still, huge, fantastic galleons of platinum and white crashed and dissolved into one another. A sharp, antiseptic smell stung his nostrils. Pat had the sensation, not so much of falling towards a fixed point as of simply moving, as if, were he to extend his arms and kick his legs, he could push in a new direction. He stretched his arms to either side and immediately slowed to a float. Looking down, he saw Lisa almost at the black threads, which appeared thicker, more substantial, heavy ropes rather than threads. They trailed a

considerable length, out to one of the white ships, churning into a mountain. Other black lines snaked from the developing mountain in all directions.

"What are you waiting for?" Lisa said. She had swum up to him. The expression on her face was not outright annoyance, but neither was it the bemused exasperation her voice was trying for.

"It's just—this is really something," he said.

"It is, isn't it? I'm forgetting this is your first time through. Sorry about that." She smiled an apology.

"What is all this?"

"Light," she said. "In here, light behaves differently. It's more," she waved a hand, "fluid."

"Huh." Pat pointed at the mountain, curling into a tsunami. "That's where Auld Glaikit is, in that … cloud?"

"At the moment." She caught his hand, his heart jumping at her touch. She tugged him toward the trio of black ropes, which had ceased their motion and were floating in place. He did not resist.

As they drew closer to them, he saw that his comparison of the appendages to ropes had been apt. Each was a braid of a half-dozen, a dozen, thinner strands, wrapped around one another in a pattern too complex for his eyes to unravel. The surface was coarse, bristling with tiny hairs; the end gathered into a slender barb the length of Pat's hand. The shape of each barb suggested the frilled head of some species of serpent. For a moment, Pat had the impression he was descending to a trio of blind snakes. Some part of him—the same bundle of phobias that caused him to leap back whenever he disturbed a garter snake while mowing the lawn—made him pull his hand free from Lisa's grip, pedal his feet to slow him.

"Patrick?" Lisa said, "What is it?" She drifted into the midst of the appendages, grabbing one of the ropes (*snakes*) behind the barb to arrest her motion.

"I'm sorry," he said, embarrassment flushing his cheeks. "These—I mean, Auld Glaikit—it's not what I'm used to, you know?"

"Let me show you something," Lisa said.

"What?"

Holding the black braid, she scissored her legs until she was beside Pat. “Give me your hand,” she said.

He did. “What do you—”

Lisa stabbed the tip of the barb into his palm. So intense, so overwhelming was the pain that he did not feel it; rather, everything around him went blank. For an instant, it was as if he had been plucked from the strange space Lisa had disclosed to him and placed in a calm, quiet room. Then his nerves caught up to the pain, and he was hanging in the air, the sharp end of a long, black rope anchored in the flesh of his hand. His mouth was wide open, a high-pitched scream streaming out of it. Tears were spilling from his eyes. He wanted to move, to tear his hand free of the barb, but he was shaking, convulsed by the pain. When Lisa yanked the end of the barb from his palm, his screaming stopped, his body went limp. Without bothering to wipe the snot running from his nose, he shouted, “What the HELL was that for?”

“Wait,” Lisa said, apparently unmoved by the ferocity of his question.

Through the pain, pounding up his arm, he felt something else, almost a tickle. He raised his injured hand, and saw in the blood spilling scarlet out of it a darker liquid. It poured from the wound like ink, rolling through his blood, dimming it to sable. A fresh wave of tears fractured his vision. She’d poisoned him. Why had she done that? He was panting, his skin clammy.

“Patrick,” Lisa said. “Patrick. I want you to listen to me. Patrick. You must listen to me. It’s important. Listen to me, Patrick. Listen.”

Somehow, he found the breath to say, “Go to hell.”

“Listen to me, Patrick. Listen to my voice.”

“Get away from me.” He kicked weakly, trying to gain distance from her. Lisa caught his leg easily and held him in place. He could not turn his eyes from the injury to his hand, from which (*blood*) liquid the rich black of used motor oil was welling up. There seemed to be something afloat in the substance, a pinpoint of brightness, which might have been a trick of the tears washing his eyes. He wiped his eyes with his left hand. No, there was something in the black, shining like a tiny star—

—and it was a star, hanging alone in a night sky. It was white, and it was close, far closer than the sun. From its right hemisphere, flame trailed into space in a cone whose far end Pat could not see. He was squinting at the star from a ledge halfway up a narrow crystal spine, from whose height he saw a forest of similar structures rising from bare rock. The entire surface of the planet he was surveying bristled with these projections, he understood. This was the last planet, facing the last star, both of them inconceivably old, the final remnants of a universe whose entire remaining matter was compacting itself into an ever-smaller, ever-hotter space, a spot whose incredible gravity was stripping the star to nothing. As the star went, so would the planet, and with it, its sole remaining inhabitant, a being whose thoughts crackled among the crystal spires, trying to calculate some way for it to survive the imminent apocalypse. What there was to its body drifted among the bases of the projections, a trio of fleshy balloons tethered by black threads. The creature—Auld Glaikit—was frantically working at a set of equations so complex as to be a form of magic, which would allow it to leap from the ruin of its cosmos to the next universe to be born from its embers. But it was still far from having solved the most challenging subsets, and the star was bleeding mass at an accelerating rate, the planet shuddering as it listed in the direction of its inevitable end. Mixed with the thoughts flickering amidst the planet's spines, Pat felt a single, overpowering emotion: dread, at the prospect of the coming annihilation—

—which gave way to horror, as pure as the edge of a razor, as the scene in front of him collapsed into a chaos of color and form, everything rushing down a funnel to a place that crushing to a point, dimensions bursting under pressure and heat, reason gone but not awareness, not horror—

—which was swept aside by a wave of triumph, of exultation, as that infinitely small spot erupted in fire and light, flinging its contents wide, and what had been and somehow still was the last creature from the previous universe became the first creature of the new one, riding a raft of light across unfolding space and time, speeding through clouds of gas condensing and kindling into stars, gradually realizing there was something wrong, something about its present state that was not as it should be, unforeseen consequence of those final, rushed calculations—

—and he was staring at the blood washing red over his skin. He lowered his hand to find Lisa watching him. “It isn’t … solid,” he said. “It made a mistake in the math. It can’t hold onto … here.”

“Not on its own,” Lisa said. “It has to be connected to someone. If it can be tethered to more than one person, so much the better. In fact, the greater the number of tethers, the closer it can draw to our reality.”

“Is that what I’m supposed to be?” Pat said. He waved his injured hand weakly.

“No,” Lisa said; although she drew out the syllable enough for Pat to hear the gears in her brain turning. “That’s not what I want. I brought you here because there was no way to tell you about any of it and have you think I was anything other than stark raving mad, was there?”

“I guess not.”

“The poke with this,” she held up the barb, its tip still smeared with his blood, “was the most efficient way to transmit Auld Glaikit’s story to you.”

“Well. What happens now?”

“That’s up to you,” Lisa said. “Since my grandfather introduced all of this to me, I’ve been on the lookout for new … connections for Auld Glaikit. It’s what grandfather did for years. It’s more of a challenge than you might expect. You can’t pick just anyone. You have to select a person whose absence won’t be noted, or which can be explained readily. Still, it’s astonishing what you can accomplish once you set your mind to it. My sister—Sara, the one I told you about, with the ring—was going through a particularly horrible spell at home. I mean, she was absolutely ghastly, and not only to me, but to my parents, as well. She was constantly threatening to leave home, run away. She’d even gone so far as to write a nasty letter to my mum and dad and me, to be discovered after she was gone. I found it tucked in her diary, which I read to keep up on her bad behavior. The moment I unfolded that letter, I knew I had the solution to two problems at once. I can’t pretend my parents weren’t upset at Sara’s sudden departure, but honestly, they were much better rid of her. Grandfather agreed with me. After Grandmother’s mind started going, and she took to wandering from the house, often quite far—well, there was nothing much for her to look forward to, was there? He understood.”

“You want me to bring my family here?” Pat said.

“No,” Lisa said, “your family’s lovely. But I’m sure there are some kids you aren’t too fond of, at school, perhaps? With a modicum of planning, you could be free of them, for good.”

Pat started to protest, no, that wasn’t true, he got along with all his classmates, but this wasn’t his mom and dad, to whom he presented a front of normalcy, lest they learn the full extent of the catastrophe that was his social life. How often had he wished for Clark Figg and Joe Weisskopf to disappear, for their families to move, for them to transfer to another school, for a fate more drastic to befall them: struck by a car while out riding their bikes, chased and beaten by a band of marauding high-schoolers? He hadn’t *prayed* for any violence to overtake them, but that was because he knew he was supposed to be working on forgiving his tormentors, not calling down divine wrath on them. Here he was, though, floating in a place that appeared to exist outside the framework of creation as he’d been taught it, treating with a being that didn’t slot into the hierarchies of angels or the ranks of their infernal counterparts. Perhaps it was necessary to be more flexible in his attitudes.

“I guess there are a couple of kids I wouldn’t be sorry to see the last of,” he said.

“Exactly,” Lisa said. “And I could show you a few tricks that would help you to bring them here.”

“Yeah?”

“Have you ever looked in a mirror and been certain, for only a second, that there was someone standing behind you? That’s called mirror walking. It allows you to peek in on all manner of places. With the proper instruction, you can step into one mirror in your house and step out of another, miles away.”

“Wow.” It was difficult not to be impressed. “Can I ask you something?”

“Of course.”

“What happens to the people who become Auld Glaikit’s tethers?”

“You can see for yourself,” Lisa said, pointing at the clouds of light. A smaller mass the shape of a whale was rolling itself into the larger wave that

housed Auld Glaikit. Flickering plumes rose and fell; shimmering waves rushed over the surface of the creature's dwelling. The black braids extending from that side of its domain recoiled at the collision, whipping their ends out of adjacent clouds. As they did, Pat saw attached to each a human form. Although the distance rendered them tiny and difficult to distinguish, Pat was pretty sure the bodies were thrashing with the agonized motion of fish hooked and dragged into the suffocating air. Was this a surprise? Hadn't he felt the creature's sentiment toward this new creation during his vision, a mix of disdain and disinterest? He glanced at Lisa. She said, "It uses the tethers as auxiliary sense organs, extra eyes and ears, to gather information."

"Through mirrors."

"Reflections," Lisa said. "You never know out of what puddle, what window, what doorknob one of its pairs of eyes might be watching you."

"Why?" Pat said. "I mean, I understand about it needing a way to keep itself here, but why does it want to spy on everyone?"

"It's studying us," Lisa said with a frown, "learning about us. For when it's finally able to cross out of this place into our world."

"And the more people we bring to it—you and I—the sooner that'll happen."

"There are others doing the same thing, but not many. As far as I'm concerned, that's better for us. Can you imagine? Once it's all the way in our universe, it's going to be extremely grateful to the ones who helped make that transition happen. Do you know what it'll do for us? Anything.

"That's why you use desire to draw it to you, because it knows desire the likes of which you and I can only dream. I wanted a ring, you wanted your robot, because we thought these things would make us more whole, somehow, as if they were parts of ourselves we hadn't known were missing. What I call Auld Glaikit wants to be whole, to be real, in the most literal of ways. Assist it, and reap the rewards."

Blood dripped from Pat's hand in long drops that plummeted past Lisa and the trio of black braids and continued to fall. He wondered if someone gazing into a mirror, a man shaving, perhaps, or a woman applying her makeup, would be surprised by a burst of red against the inside of the glass.

He said, “Can we do something about my hand? I know you did what you had to do, but it’s still pretty painful.” He tilted his head back, sighting the dark, rectangular slot in the air that marked the route back to his room.

“What does that mean?” Lisa said.

“It means I need both hands in good working order,” Pat said. “Those kids are bigger than I am.”

“Wonderful,” Lisa said. “I had a feeling about you.”

“Thank you,” he said, “for showing me all of this. It’s incredible.”

“You’re very welcome,” she said. “This is just the beginning. I promise you, you’ll be amazed at what comes next.” She released the black braid, which looped away from her, curving with its mates in the direction of Auld Glaikit.

Returning to the opening to his room was harder than Pat had anticipated. The mirror was further than it appeared, and it was more difficult to push toward it than it had been to descend into this place. His hand hurt with a deep pain, which ran straight through his arm to his chest, which was strangely hollow, as if the injury had emptied him. Below, Lisa called, “Would you like me to go first? It doesn’t look as if you’re moving very well.”

“I’m okay,” he said. “If it’s all the same to you, I’d rather have you behind me, in case something happens and I fall.”

“If that’s what you want.”

“Thanks,” Pat said. “Thank you.”

He swam past a school of shining ribbons, glimpsing in their silver lengths fragmentary images: a trio of boys his approximate age facing a painting; an old man asleep beside a stream, his fishing pole forgotten; a girl with short, platinum hair kissing a guy in a varsity letter jacket. Reflections—pieces of them, at least. He tried to picture what it would be like for Clark Figg or Joe Weisskopf to find themselves stuck here. Even if they weren’t dangling on the end of Auld Glaikit’s arms, Pat couldn’t imagine either of them would go very long before losing his marbles. The thought was satisfying, deeply and frighteningly so. Would it be that difficult to bring Clark or Joe to this place, especially if Lisa followed through on her pledge

to teach him how to approach them, unseen? Assuming what she had said was true (and why shouldn't it be? everything else she'd told him was), there would be no way to trace such an action to him. It would be a simple matter of waiting for either kid to stray close enough to the right mirror, opening the mirror, and hauling him through. No muss, no fuss, and no Clark or Joe to torment him. They wouldn't even be dead, technically speaking: they'd be part of something bigger, something greater.

He felt himself standing at the brink of a precipice, the edge of which was crumbling into space. Vertigo squeezed his stomach. What he was contemplating was far beyond agreeing to Lisa's proposal so she wouldn't trap him here. This was embracing what she'd put forward, opening himself to it because it evoked a sympathetic—an enthusiastic response from deep within him. He recalled this past summer's family vacation, a couple of weeks prior to Lisa and Carol's arrival. A late night conversation with his parents had soured into an argument whose end had been Pat asking his father if he considered him a bad son, to which his father had answered, "Yes." *I could show him bad*, Pat thought, *I could show him bad like he wouldn't believe*.

Except he couldn't. He pictured his father's face, his expression fearful—eyes wide, mouth agape, skin pale—and the image filled him with terrible sadness, sadness and dread. He didn't feel nearly as bad at the prospect of similar looks on Clark and Joe, but he was aware of the imbalance of such a revenge.

He was almost at the opening to his room. Dangard Ace and Lisa's ring floated an arm's length from him. Through the mirror's shape, his nightstand, the headboard of his bed, was visible. He glanced at Lisa. She was at least a yard below him. She caught his look, said, "What? What is it?" He fumbled for an answer, still unsure of his exact plan, but while the words were rolling around in his mouth, Lisa's eyes hardened and he saw that she knew, had recognized his betrayal while he was still working through it. Her skin flushed. "You little shite," she said, the rest of the reproach she spat at him lost as he pulled and kicked for the exit from this space with all the strength available him. The fingers of his left hand touched the frame, but before he could grasp it, Lisa's outstretched hand caught his right ankle. She dug her nails into his skin. He screamed, striking

at her fingers with his other foot. She swore, released his leg. Like a swimmer racing to the surface, he kicked, propelling his left arm and the top of his head through into his room. He flailed his arm wildly, clawing at the sheets on his brother's bed, slapping the carpet beside the mirror. He bent his arm, pressed down on it to lever the rest of his head and his right arm out of the mirror. Lisa was right behind him. She had not stopped trying to grab one of his legs, but the blood streaking his right foot and her palm hindered her efforts. She was shouting, her words distorted and diminished by his partial escape, but he didn't need to hear them to know the harm they promised. Ignoring the pain in his right hand, he placed it flat on the floor and pushed. White light flashed in front of his eyes. He brought his legs up, swinging the left and then the right out onto the carpet.

Relief flooded him. He couldn't rest, though. Already, Lisa's fingers were gripping the sides of the frame. Her threats burst into the room along with her angry face. Pat scrambled to his feet. "—you think that's the worst that can happen? You don't have a bloody clue, do you? I'll see you cored like an apple. I'll have you scraped out and used as a vessel for you-can't-imagine-what. I'll watch you drag the rest of your family to Auld Glaikit, and I'll laugh at their screams. I'll—"

Her voice stopped when she registered Pat, one foot on either side of the mirror, one hand on each of the fishing poles. She didn't waste time asking what he was doing; instead, she released her hold on the frame and went to duck. As she did, Pat yanked the lures into the room.

There was a sound like a knife biting through a watermelon. The top half of Lisa's skull, from right below the sockets, sat on the suddenly-solid glass into whose depths Pat saw the rest of her body falling, blood trailing from the lower half of her head in a scarlet plume. He leapt back, dropping the toy and ring, which retained sufficient charm to pierce the mirror's surface. Eyes yet wide, outraged, the top of Lisa's head sank into the aperture, following the rest of her into Auld Glaikit's flickering domain.

Although Pat set the alarm on his clock radio for three a.m., he didn't need it. He had told his parents he was going to bed, and had closed his eyes and faked unconsciousness to get Davis to stop talking to him and go to sleep,

himself, but sleep had maintained its distance, which wasn't much of a surprise. His brain was overfull, brimming with the afternoon's events and their consequences that evening and night. His parents, siblings, and cousin had returned from the shopping trip to a scene of chaos: Pat, sprawled in the hallway outside his and Davis's room, his mother's silver hand mirror broken beside his head, pieces of its glass in his scalp, a deep wound in his right hand, scratches on his legs. Nor was his mother's mirror the only one shattered: every last mirror in the house had been cracked. Of neither Lisa nor her luggage was there any sign. The sight of him made his mother shriek, his sisters and cousin cry. His father hurried to his side, glass crunching under his sneakers, telling Davis to call an ambulance and kneeling beside Pat, asking him what had happened.

He kept his story simple. He had been reading in the living room. He heard crashing from the other end of the house. He went to see what was happening, found Lisa using the handle of Mom's good mirror to smash the mirror in his and Davis's room, then the mirror on his sisters' bureau, then the bathroom mirror. He tried to talk to her, told her to stop, but it was like she was crazy. She kept saying that something in the mirror was after her; she'd thought she could escape it if she flew all the way to America, but she'd been wrong. Pat had put out his hand, and she grabbed one of the shards of glass and stabbed him in the palm. That was when he realized he was in real danger. He went to run away, but she cracked him on the head with Mom's mirror. After that, things were fuzzy. She dragged him into the hallway. He thought maybe he heard the front door opening and closing. He wasn't sure how much longer it took for his family to arrive home.

In the hours to come, Pat repeated his account of Lisa's frenzied actions several times: to the sheriff's deputy who was first to reach the house, to the paramedics who showed up shortly thereafter, to the town police officers who appeared next, to the detective they called in to interview him. He resisted the urge to embellish, to improve the narrative he'd arrived at before striking himself as hard as he could with his mother's mirror. No, he didn't know where Lisa had gone. No, he hadn't heard her phone anyone. No, he hadn't heard any cars pulling up outside. The cops were kindly, apologetic at having to ask him so many questions for so long. If we can catch her, they said, it'll prevent her from doing the same thing to anyone

else. Pat said he understood. He cried frequently, in great sobs that shook his body. His parents, the police, patted his back and told him it was all right, he was safe, now. He couldn't tell them about the place on the other side of the mirror, the black braids lazing from Auld Glaikit's thicket of light, the barb piercing his hand. He couldn't tell them what he'd been shown by the creature, how the top of Lisa's head had rested on the mirror's glass, blood leaking all around its edges onto the glass. He could cry, so he did.

Eventually, the police left; though they said they'd want to talk to him some more, tomorrow. He nodded, thanked them. He wasn't worried about them finding out what had happened to Lisa, or what hadn't, for the matter. He had tipped her things into his room's mirror, tossing the fishing poles and their lures in after. Strangely, he'd felt a pang watching Dangard Ace plummet out of view. For a moment, the mirror continued to give a view of the other space, then it blurred into the flat plane of the ceiling overhead. He tested its surface with his left hand, and once he was satisfied of its solidity, turned it over and stomped on its backing. To that seven years' bad luck, he piled on decades more, running from room to room, breaking every mirror he could find, ending with his mother's hand mirror against his head. Now that a route had been established between his home and Auld Glaikit's, who knew if the creature or its agents might be able to access the house via another mirror. It was best not to take chances.

All the same, there were surfaces that gave reflections in every room, and he couldn't destroy them all. It might be possible to occlude a certain number, smear dirt on the basement windows, say, which were high and small and seldom paid attention to by his parents. He would have to work on the problem, as soon as he attended to his hand.

Shortly after the paramedic had cleaned, inspected, and bandaged it, the wound had started to itch. Just noticeable enough to distract him as he answered the assorted police officers' questions, the sensation persisted for the remainder of the day. Along with that itch had come a feeling of pressure behind his eyes, at his temples, which appeared to grow out of his memories of what Auld Glaikit had shown him, the bristling planet, the star draining to nothing, as if the images were swelling his brain. It seemed likely Auld Glaikit had left some piece of itself behind in him, as a hedge

against betrayal. He was going to have to remove the bandages from his hand and examine the wound, but he was going to have to wait until the rest of his family was asleep.

Which they now were. He reached to the clock radio, clicked the alarm off, and slid from under the covers. Davis slumbered quietly in his bed. Pat crept to the door, opened it, and leaned his head into the hall. From his parents' room, his father's snores came steadily. His sisters' room was silent. The light in the living room, where Carol was sleeping (and where Lisa had been staying with her), was out. Moving slowly along floorboards whose creaks sounded extra-loud, Pat crossed the hall to the kitchen. His father had left the light over the sink on, for which Pat was grateful. The linoleum was quieter underfoot. He padded to the countertop to the left of the faucet, where the knife rack offered the handles of half a dozen blades of varying lengths and purposes. He withdrew one, another, searching for the long, slender knife his father sometimes used for slicing a roast thin. Once he had it in hand, he retreated halfway up the hall to the bathroom. He locked the door, set the knife on the edge of the sink, and opened the medicine cabinet. The tweezers were on the bottom shelf, the bottle of mercurochrome on the middle. He removed both and put them beside the knife. In the cupboard under the sink, he found gauze pads and a roll of medical tape. He placed them on the other side of the sink. He returned to the medicine cabinet for the slender surgical scissors on the top shelf. With the scissors, he cut away the bandages around his hand. He let the bandages fall into the sink. He swapped the scissors for the tweezers, which he used to peel away the pads with which the paramedic had layered his injury. The uppermost pad bore a scattering of rust-colored spots, and as he progressed down, the gauze squares turned dark red. The last couple adhered to the rent in his flesh in places; by the time he was done detaching them, sweat was tickling the sides of his face. But he had succeeded in confining his expressions of pain to a few sharp intakes of breath, so he figured he was doing all right.

It was a wonder, the paramedic who tended his hand said, that the injury had missed the tendons, avoided the bones. Looking at the raw, red cavity in his palm, still oozing blood and lymph, Pat did not feel especially wonderful. He lifted his hand, narrowing his eyes to peer into the wound.

There. Right away, he saw it, a black fleck in the deepest part of the cut. Not much longer than the splinters he sometimes picked up running his hand along the rails on the back porch, it was a collection of points of differing lengths, like a sea urchin. Already, the longer points had dug into the surrounding tissue.

Panic surged in his chest. *It's too late*, he thought. *It's in too deep*. Tears wobbled his vision. He lowered his right hand, used the left to reach for a towel to wipe his eyes. *Okay. Okay. You have to do this. You don't have a choice*.

He didn't, did he? He took a deep breath. The tweezers weren't going to be any use: there was too much chance of them breaking off one of the spines, and then what would he do? He was going to have to cut the thing out, together with a sufficient margin of flesh to keep it contained.

Pat picked up the knife. He hoped its edge was sharp enough, his hand steady enough.

What You Do Not Bring Forth

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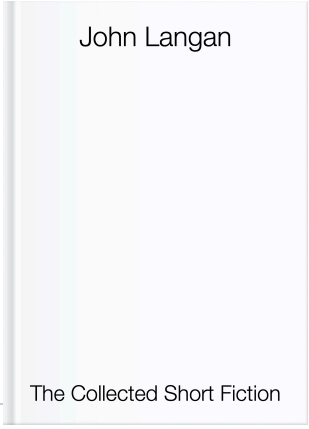


In the right circumstances, Pete's daughter, Lee, is fond of telling people that her father always has at least one knife on him at all times. Since these circumstances tend to arise at larger events—book signings, readings, dinner parties—there is never a shortage of raised eyebrows, furtive glances between guests, murmurs of disbelief. At Lee's prompting, Pete shoves one hand into the front right pocket of his khakis or slacks and retrieves a folding knife whose handle is paneled with dark cheery wood. He opens the knife with his left hand, disclosing a shining blade whose shape resembles a miniature scimitar. He's known for writing novels that feature serial killers, most of whom favor knives, and the audience for his display is unsure whether the weapon is produced ironically or in earnest. The majority deem it a piece of theater, though a few make reference to the perils of living in the City. None of them could guess the reason for this knife and the one like it Pete keeps in his other pocket. For the matter, neither could his charming daughter.

That reason wears a brown fedora pulled low over his brow and a tan trenchcoat with the collar tugged up, as if in imitation of every private eye in every film noir since the form took shape. Pete has never seen enough of the man's face to be able to describe it to, say, a police sketch artist. Only the eyes, deep set, and the top of the nose, dented above the bridge, as if it were struck with a blunt instrument or the edge of a hand, and failed to heal properly. The man's hands have remained hidden from view—at least, Pete thinks they have. He has a confused memory of seeing them in heavy gloves, which he cannot place and therefore does not trust.

It must be noted, Pete carried some form of knife long before his first glimpse of the man he has christened Alan Ladd. It would be more accurate to say that, the moment his gaze settled on the trenchcoated figure standing at the back of one of his readings, he was overcome by a sensation of such distress, such dread, that he stopped reading. He reached for a cup of water with a hand trembling so severely he spilled the water all over his shirt. Mumbling apologies, he brought the event to an immediate conclusion, retreating to a bathroom in the bookstore's stock room, then slipping out the back door. Half expecting the man to be waiting for him, he had one knife out and opened, his free hand on the other. The alleyway was empty, but as he hurried to the nearest subway station he understood that it was for this man that he had been arming himself for years, since he was a teen, earlier.

He did not speak to his therapist about Alan Ladd (a name he had selected not for any overwhelming resemblance between this man and the actor, but because Pete's glimpse of him had brought to mind the actor's furtive, hunted air in *This Gun for Hire*). At the time, he and Dr. Mobley were discussing a dream Pete recorded in the dream journal she had instructed him to keep. In this dream, he was trying to climb a stepladder to reach a cord hanging from a door set in the ceiling of the room he was in—which he had the strong impression was in his aunt and uncle's house outside Chicago. With each step higher he took, the ladder grew less steady, swaying from side to side as if the bolts and screws holding it together were dropping out of it. He knew with absolute certainty that a) he was going to fall and b) the consequence of his fall would be severe, possibly fatal. Despite this foreknowledge, he continued his ascent, gripping metal less and less firm to the touch. When he was almost at the rope handle, the door in the ceiling flapped down, clanging against the stepladder and releasing a cloud of large, parchment-colored moths into the room. The insects filled the air around him; he swatted at them, lost his balance, and plummeted to what should have been his death, but was instead to his awakening in his bed, pulse racing, pajamas soaked in sweat.

While Dr. Mobley would not commit to a definitive interpretation of his dream, it was apparent she saw it as an expression of Pete's anxieties about his continuing success as a writer, of his concern that whatever critical status he had achieved was in danger of slipping away, and suddenly at that.

Given the facts of his life, the analysis was reasonable, even compelling. Yet Pete remained unconvinced by it. Where the doctor focused on the detail of the ladder, he was drawn to the door in the ceiling that had crashed open, the moths whose wings had fluttered against the backs of his hands, his cheeks, his ears. He had been climbing toward something, reaching for admission to whatever lay on the other side of the ceiling. Had that been only the moths? Or was there something beyond them? Each night following that of the dream, he went to bed telling himself that this time his dreams would return him to the room in (maybe) his aunt and uncle's house, where he would discover what the door in the ceiling concealed. That space, though, remained closed to him.

When he saw Alan Ladd standing at the back of the bookstore, Pete immediately connected him to the dream. It wasn't that he was part of the dream—what was waiting behind the ceiling door—so much as it was that he seemed in some way to *be* the dream, made flesh through a process Pete could not guess and set loose on the world. This was lunacy, of course, but his recognition of the fact did little to alter his sense of the fundamental rightness of his impression. It helped, he fancied, to account for the terror that continued to grip him each time he spotted the fedora and trenchcoat toward the rear of whatever space he was delivering his current reading in. After all, dreams were inherently irrational, knots of image and action that stood in for emotions and experiences writhing deep within the brain's folds.

Though he has yet to discuss Alan Ladd with his therapist, Pete has had a brief exchange with his daughter about the man. This took place after they participated in a panel discussion at the CUNY Graduate Center on the one hundred and fifteenth anniversary of the publication of Freud's *Interpretation of Dreams.* Pete talked about the significance of psychoanalysis to the literature of crime and horror in general, and of his novels in particular. Lee compared Freud's ideas concerning the significance of dreams to those of Jung, about whom she had published a well-received popular study. One of the other panelists, a bearded man with glasses of whose credentials Pete was uncertain, pronounced it an essential quality of dreams that they retained a degree of opacity to the dreamer. Even in cases of lucid dreaming, the bearded man went on, he had never

encountered an instance in which the dreamer fully understood what was happening. “A dream does not explain itself to you,” he said.

“Neither does life,” Lee said.

“Life is but a dream,” Pete said, adding, “Oh, sorry: merrily, merrily, merrily, merrily,” which drew a laugh from the audience.

Afterwards, before he descended from the stage on which the panel had been seated, Pete saw Alan Ladd lurking at the rear of the auditorium. With as much grace as he could muster on legs gone wobbly, Pete retreated to the table behind which he had spent the past hour and lowered himself onto the chair he had just vacated. Catching sight of him there, Lee ran up the short flight of stairs to the stairs and rushed to his side. “Dad,” she said, crouching beside him. “Are you all right?”

“No,” he said, too agitated to lie to her.

“What’s wrong? Is it your heart?”

“My heart?” he said. “No, my heart’s fine. No.” He shook his head. How to phrase this to her? “There’s a man who’s been coming to my events for a little while, now. He wears a hat, a fedora, and a trenchcoat. He stands at the back of whatever venue I’m at.”

“That guy?” Lee said. “I thought he was a fan.”

“A fan?”

“Yeah. He dresses the way the hero of *The Cellar* does at the climax—what was his name?”

“Baggins, Fred Baggins.”

“Remember, he even thinks he looks like something out an old film noir. And then he winds up in the cellar of that bar, where he has the showdown with the cop—”

“Pforzheimer.”

“Who’s wearing a trenchcoat and fedora, too, right? Jesus, Dad, you wrote it. I saw this guy the first time he showed up at one of your readings. I figured he was playing dress-up—cosplay, right?”

“He isn’t,” Pete said. “He’s… dangerous…”

“What do you mean?” His daughter’s brow lowered. “Has he threatened you? Is he stalking you?”

“Yes. Not the threatening, but I believe he is stalking me.”

“Has he said anything to you?”

“Not one word.” Pete waved his hand. The strength had returned to his legs. He stood. “Maybe you’re right. It could be—maybe this fellow is a fan, and that’s all.”

“Don’t get me wrong,” Lee said, rising, “some of your fans are pretty creepy.”

“Never mind,” he said. “It’s probably all in my head.”

As the words left his mouth, Pete could taste their dishonesty. It wasn’t so much that he was protecting Lee from a potential threat—she had been taking *krav maga* classes for a couple of years and had successfully incapacitated a man who had made the mistake of attempting to mug her. Besides, Alan Ladd didn’t seem the slightest bit interested in anyone but Pete. No, what he wanted to preserve was his freedom to pursue this matter in whatever way he judged best. His daughter narrowed her eyes, a sure sign she suspected Pete of dissembling to her, but she did not follow her critical look with the usual statement masquerading as a question.

Since that night, every time Alan Ladd has put in an appearance at one of Pete’s events, if Lee is present, he has noticed her noticing the man. On a couple of occasions, she has attempted to navigate the room to him, only to have some woman or man stop Lee to talk to her. No matter how short she cuts their conversations, by the time they’re done Alan Ladd has slipped away. Although Pete keeps an eye on her during these moments—one hand in his pocket, knife in his grasp—he has not said anything to his daughter about her efforts to confront Alan Ladd. He isn’t sure she is aware he’s been watching her. Nor has she raised the matter with him.

If he has preserved his freedom of action in regard to Alan Ladd, Pete has not decided how best to use it. He could hire a private detective to watch for the man at his next reading, tail him when he ducks out, trail him to whatever address he calls home, and use that location to unearth information about him. He could talk to Dr. Mobley about the intense dread Alan Ladd’s appearance continues to evoke in him, work at digging down

to the reasons for this. He could focus on ignoring the man. He could take a break from public life, test whether his absence might cause Alan Ladd to lose interest in him. Each option has its drawbacks, but this is not what keeps Pete from choosing among them. Rather, it's because he has a sense that, when he arrives at his course of action, he will do so all at once, in the heat of the moment. He will lift the phone and punch in the number of the private detective he Googled. He will lean forward in his chair and say to Dr. Mobley, "I want to talk to you about something." He will avoid looking in Alan Ladd's direction. He will send a group email to every venue at which he is scheduled to speak for the next twelve months, explaining that circumstances beyond his control require that he withdraw from all such things for the foreseeable future. Dr. Mobley has warned him against impulsive behavior, which has not done him any favors in the past; but Pete feels, somewhere below the pit of his stomach, whatever he is to do must be done in this fashion.

That Alan Ladd might escalate their encounters drastically, dramatically, is a possibility Pete entertained a good deal the first times he saw the man but which, as time has slipped by, he has worried about less, on the principle that, if Alan Ladd were going to do anything more, he would have by now. Yet the next time Pete sees the man, this is exactly what he does. This happens in a small theater in Brooklyn, where Pete is part of a discussion of *Spellbound.* For the length of the panel—which includes Lee and a bearded man he recognizes from a previous event—the fedora and trenchcoat are absent from the audience. Nor does Alan Ladd put in an appearance during the question-and-answer period, which cheers Pete so much he remains in the theater to talk to a pair of young writers who have taken the train from Connecticut to attend the panel. After he has signed the copies of his books they have produced, posed for pictures with them, and sent them on their way, he climbs the stairs to the stage and the table where the panelists were seated, on which, he realized, he left his dream journal. He brought the book because some of its more bizarre imagery made a good fit with the film's famous sets, and while he has come to doubt the therapeutic usefulness of this record of his brain's nighttime activity, he thinks that a few of its scenarios might contain the germs of possible stories, even a short novel. As his fingertips brush the journal's leather cover, he hears footsteps

hurrying up one of the theater's aisles. Lee, perhaps, coming to ask him what's taking so long. He turns, a quip at the ready, and sees Alan Ladd striding toward him.

Pete's response is immediate, automatic. He runs. Journal in one hand, he bolts for the back of the stage, where a red EXIT sign glows over a door. Pete slams into the pressure bar across the door, flinging it wide. He expected to emerge into an alley behind the theater; instead, he's at the top of a flight of wooden stairs. There's no other choice: he races down them. Overhead, the door booms as Alan Ladd heaves it open. At the foot of the stairs, a brick corridor stretches left and right. Pete chooses right, runs along a passageway barely wide enough to admit him, his flight lit by weak light bulbs caged every ten feet or so. Underfoot, the floor angles down. Behind him, Alan Ladd's shoes thwack one-two one-two.

The corridor empties into a large room. Thick brick pillars support a sagging ceiling. Wood crates stacked two and three high line the walls, their sides stenciled with words Pete cannot make out. His eyes dart around the room, searching for another way out of it. He must be under whatever building is next to the theater. (What is that? A bar?)

Coat flapping, Alan Ladd erupts into the room. Too late, Pete thinks that he should have used one of the pillars to conceal himself. He drops the dream journal, fumbles in his pocket for the knife there. Alan Ladd advances. There's something in his right hand. Black, snub-nosed—a pistol. He brings it up as he closes the distance to Pete, who has his knife out and is trying to open it with trembling fingers. The blade sweeps out and clicks into place. Alan Ladd is an arm's length away, pointing the muzzle of the gun at the center of Pete's chest. With a grace of which he would not have believed himself possessed, Pete steps forward and to the right, catching Alan Ladd's wrist with his left hand and sweeping the knife into the man's chest with his right hand. In quick succession, he stabs Alan Ladd half a dozen times, while twisting the man's wrist sharply, causing him to release the gun. Pete lets go of him, and Alan Ladd sits down hard. There is surprisingly little blood on the knife, which Pete holds in front of him as he sidesteps to where the pistol lies on the floor. He doesn't want to chance stooping to retrieve it, so he kicks it skittering to the side.

He is exuberant, exalted; he feels as if he could run a hundred miles, a thousand, skip across continents, seas. He should speak, say something to Alan Ladd, who sits hunched over, his head titled low, dark patches spreading across the breast of his trenchcoat. Now is the time to demand the man explain himself, account for his relentless presence. But his victory has placed Pete momentarily beyond language.

It is Alan Ladd who breaks the silence between them. In a voice that sits low in his mouth, he says, “I could not bring you forth.”

“What?”

“If you cannot bring forth what is inside you,” Alan Ladd says, “it will destroy you. So.”

His words ring in Pete’s head like the tolling of enormous bells, loosening his tongue. “What are you talking about? Who are you? Why have you been following me? What is it you want?”

“How many nights—” The man coughs, spraying blood over his coat. “I’ve sat in the diner, pen in hand, notebook open, trying the waitresses’ patience with my endless cups of coffee.”

“I don’t—”

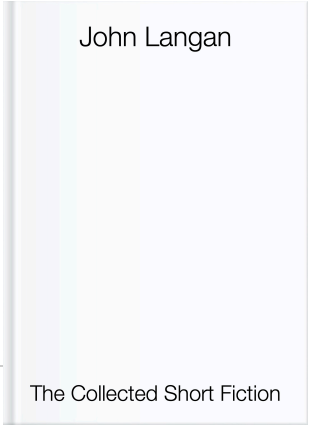
“Minotaur,” Alan Ladd mumbles. “You were there, hiding between blue lines. I could feel you, roaming the long corridors.” He sags forward, vents a liquid breath, and is still.

“Goddammit,” Pete says. Suddenly he is deflated, exhausted. Nausea tightens his throat. He considers the blade in his hand. No doubt the police will want it. He crouches, sets the knife on the floor. He looks at Alan Ladd, whose face remains obscured by the fedora. Pete shifts into a half-kneel, reaching his hand to lift the hat’s brim.

The instant his fingers brush its edge, the hat bursts into a cloud of fluttering insects, of moths, their furred bodies the color of antique paper. Alan Ladd is gone, the space in which he died full of the moths and their frantic motion. Pete scrambles backward, lurches to his feet, and flees along the passage that brought him here. Moths cling to his shirt, his hair.

Sweet Angie Tailor in: Subterranean Showdown

First published in *Through a Mythos Darkly* (June 2017)



THE AMBUSH CAME LATER THAN ANGELA EXPECTED, A SUCCESSION of explosions on the boulders around her, scattering chips of rock, lead fragments, followed close on by the cracks of the rifles from the low ridge at her back. Had positions been reversed, she would have opened fire when her target was halfway from the foot of the ridge to the mouth of the cave and the weird arrangement of boulders in front of it. Assuming she had Petty's bravos at her disposal, she would not have had all of them shoot at once, either, since she was fairly certain none of them was in possession of a repeating rifle, giving their target whatever time she needed to find cover, as Angela was doing now, ducking behind a rock like a large stone talon. Her Schofield was in hand, but the ridge was too distant for accuracy with the pistol. Better to be patient, wait for her would-be assassins to descend to finish her, and if necessary employ the terrain to balance the advantage of their numbers. She was sufficiently ahead of schedule to be able to pause here for a moment.

High on the ridge, Petty shouted at her, his threat or taunt rendered unintelligible by the distance. Angela resisted the urge to waste a bullet making him flinch. There was a low, wide rock three running steps closer to where the cave mouth slanted up from the earth; she preferred the protection it afforded to the rock against which her back was pressed. One hand on her derby, she sprinted, leaping on and sliding across the boulder's smooth top, dropping off—into something like a feather quilt, a softness that yielded to her weight while flowing up and over her. Had she been moving with less speed, had she touched the edge of the Jellied Time with the toe of her boot, and had she recognized it for what it was immediately, she might have been able to avoid it, to yank her foot free of her boot and

wait while the Jelly investigated it. This way, though, there was nothing she could do, no escaping the memories into which she was plunged—sitting at the bar in the Gates of Perdition saloon, its name the most elaborate part of the business thrown up to profit from the influx of cowboys looking to take advantage of Runyon Hawk's expansive cattle empire, as well as the irregular traffic headed west, in the direction of the mountains Angela still thought of as the Rockies, although most of the newspapers this last decade had adopted the name given them (so the story went) by one of the cavalry officers who had survived the disastrous attempt to retake them, the Break. All manner of things had poured out of the gap the mine outside Denver had made between this world and the other, hellish place whose nature was still not understood (though Satan's domain was a popular explanation). Some of what had streamed forth was alive, albeit, in ways to boggle the mind, smite the senses: conglomerations of limbs from what should have been half a dozen different creatures; shimmering masses that rolled across the sand, burning it to glass behind them; flies the size of sparrows, their fleshy mouths trilling sounds some claimed formed the words of awful songs, songs to drive you mad. Some of what spread from the Break was inanimate: chunks of rock studded with crystals whose color and configuration were alien; pieces of metal fashioned by who could imagine what hands into strange instruments; even scraps of paper, torn and charred, covered in the symbols of no known alphabet. In short, there was a great deal of potential treasure for the intrepid and resourceful adventurer to retrieve and return back east, to the government bureaus and the universities dedicated to studying whatever they could lay their hands on from that wasteland. Not to mention, there were private collectors, of motivations frequently unclear and dubious, who were willing to pay well—pay extravagantly, in many cases, for an especially unique specimen of the disaster that had rendered the western third of the country uninhabitable.

Of course, the hazards accompanying any voyage into the territory bordering the Break were many, ranging from the minor (such as the areas of thickened space known as Jellied Time, which enveloped the unwary and spun them through their memories) to the irritating (such as the tiny toadstools that might erupt from the armpit, or crook of the elbow, or behind the knee, and then itch uncontrollably until burned off) to the deadly

(the Crescent Moons, named for their shape, each no bigger than a pinky, but covered in a sharp, bony exterior that they used to their advantage when they shot up from where they lay buried in the earth and sliced through the feet, legs, and bodies of whoever had trod on them). Should the adventurer survive any of these encounters and return from their expedition, the Army enforced a stringent medical exam that was as likely as not to send the hapless survivor to one of the quarantine camps visible from the major roads, their residents fenced behind barbed wire. Few, it was reported, who were confined to the Army's care left it.

All of which was likely to cause the adventurer riding west a spot of unease, possibly fear, which saloons such as the Gates were happy to modulate with their house specials, whose names ranged from the familiar and somewhat pedestrian firewater and rotgut to the colorful and exotic Mother's Ire and the Undertaker's Yardstick. On the Kansas border, the saloons were large, brick and timber affairs, with a long, polished bar, a floor full of tables for cards or conversation, and a set of stairs leading to a second storey whose rooms might be employed for a variety of relaxing activities. The further west you traveled, the more modest the establishment became, shedding their extra stories, their tables, their fancy bars, and finally their firm walls and ceilings, until what you had was a canvas tent at one end of which a plank was balanced on a couple of sawhorses, and a bookshelf that had seen better days on the other side of the makeshift bar, its shelves lined with scratched bottles whose contents resembled rust-tinted water. A barrel positioned in one corner held the glasses of those who favored conversation; what appeared to be the former altar of a Christian church set in the corner opposite and was the location for a local subset of poker that had been underway when Angela strode to the bar, and had continued as she tossed back two shots of the Undertaker's Yardstick (which, true to the name, tasted as if they brought her that much closer to the ministrations of that universal servant), then switched to something called a Morning Glory (whose mix of bitter and syrupy sweet suggested the Yardstick dumped into a glass of sarsaparilla). Despite a series of dramatic reversals of fortune, accompanied by some ominous pronouncements from several of the players, the poker game was not done

when one of Petty's bravos leaned on the bar to her right and said, "Well, if it ain't Sweet Angie Tailor."

Had there been a mirror behind the bar, Angela could have avoided turning to the man. As it was, she pivoted on her stool, allowing her right arm to drop casually, sweeping back her duster so that her pistol was exposed in its holster. Certain that she didn't, she said, "Do I know you?"

Her fellow patron was on the tall side, dressed in the worn and torn tunic of a member of the U.S. Cavalry. His face was tanned, the skin tight on the bone, a black mustache overhanging his upper lip. "No ma'am," he said, nodding, "I don't reckon you do." What teeth remained him were yellowed stumps, his gums black. "But me and the rest of my crew know you. Sweet Angie Tailor, the woman who will get the job done. That's what the newspaper stories say. And that," he gestured at her Schofield, "must be the Solution! You know, you are the only one I ever heard tell of named their iron. Such an unusual name, too. Some of the boys think it's a woman thing, but I said I ain't too sure about that."

Angela didn't answer the man's speculation. Out of the corner of her eye, she had noticed the group of figures massed to her right, ten feet away. The fellow's crew, no doubt.

"What I was wondering," the man said, "is if it's true you're here about the trouble over at Mr. Hawk's ranch?"

"What business is it of yours?" Angela said.

"It's funny you should say business," the man said, "because that's exactly what this is about, is business. Namely, our business, me and my associates'. You see, we also have come in answer to Mr. Hawk's call for help with his cattle problem. This places us in competition with you."

Already, Angela could predict the next half-dozen exchanges she and the bravo would have, each of them crafted to nudge them closer to the moment he could draw the Bowie knife jammed into his belt, whose hilt the fingers of his left hand were inching towards, and try for her. He wouldn't succeed, but he would provide his fellows the opportunity to enact whatever play they had scripted. She smiled at the man as she raised her glass to her lips—and dashed its contents in his eyes. He jerked back, but she was off the stool, catching the side of his head with her left hand and slamming it into

the bar, while her right hand drew her pistol and pointed it at his comrades, who were too startled by her burst of motion to do anything but gawk.

"I call my sidearm the Solution," she said, "because it solves problems." The man was lifting his head from the bar; she grabbed his hair and drove his skull into the wood a second time. He groaned deeply and, when she released his hair, slid to the ground. Stepping away from him, she turned her attention to his companions, all of whom were holding their hands clear of their knives and guns, lest they offer her a provocation. With one exception, the men were dressed in the same scavenged military uniforms as their fallen friend, their faces worn and ravaged by violence and disease. Positioned behind the front row of three, the exception was obviously the leader, a rail of a man wearing a denim suit and a stovepipe hat. A fringe of fleshy tendrils bearded his jaw, consequence of one of the newer venereal diseases. "Mr. Petty," she said.

Petty's eyes widened, his face flushing to the tips of his flesh beard. "I am flattered," he said. "I was not aware that my humble activities had brought me to the notice of the illustrious Sweet Angie Tailor."

"I pay attention," Angela said, "especially as concerns the competition."

Petty's lips curved into a smile. "I suppose we are," he said. "Which sets me on the horns of a dilemma. The prize Mr. Runyon Hawk is promising to whoever can settle his cattle difficulties is not inconsiderable. To be frank, even split nine ways, it is enough money to ease a poor man's situation for quite some time. While I am certain of our ability to address Mr. Hawk's concerns in both a timely and effective manner, due to our numbers, we cannot move as speedily—as nimbly, you might say, as a lone… *businesswoman*." He wrinkled his lips, as if the word tasted sour. "Especially when that businesswoman has the well-earned reputation of dealing with situations such as this one promptly and directly, the possibility arises of her doing so before any of her rivals has the opportunity to put their plan into action."

"However," Angela said, "if you and your men kill me here, then there's no more dilemma. I assume that's what you did to whoever else answered Hawk's advertisement."

“Not everyone required so extreme a means of persuasion,” Petty said. “Many—most of them simply left. It would do no harm to the considerable esteem in which you are held if you rode after them.”

“Your friend,” she tilted her head at the man on the floor, “gave me the same speech, without the flowery bullshit. You see where it got him.”

“There are eight of us,” Petty said.

“I’m impressed you can count that high,” Angela said. “I’m not sure I can kill all of you. But if any of you tries for me, I promise you, I will kill you, and you, and you, and you, and you, and you,” she said, pointing the Schofield at five of the bravos, watching their faces pale as the muzzle slid over each of them, and ending with Petty. “In fact,” she said, “I’ll shoot you first, Mr. Petty. Should one or two of you survive, I guess you could try for Hawk’s reward, yourself, but I can’t say I like your odds without the help of your friends.”

Petty’s face was still red, but it was with choler. “I can assure you—”

“I can assure you,” Angela said, “that I have been threatened by many men, and not a few women, besides. If it’s all the same to you, I’ll be on my way.” Her gun trained on Petty’s head, she circled him and his men, noting the rifles slung across their backs, single shot Springfields and Lorenzes. She backed to the front of the tent and stepped out—

—into Runyon Hawk’s study. A museum of the man’s accomplishments, the fieldstone walls of the room were hung with mementoes of his six decades: a Mexican regimental flag and officer’s saber, souvenirs of his participation in the war with the United States’ southern neighbor; the pistol and saber of the Confederate horseman who had almost run him down during a skirmish outside of Chattanooga; the taxidermied heads of grizzlies, wolves, elk, and deer, as well as a pair of sizable glass containers that held what appeared to be a couple of gallons of blackish water each, until an eye opened in the liquid, and another, then a third, and whatever was imprisoned in the glass splashed furiously against its confines. Below the trophies of war and sport, glass-doored bookcases alternated with racks staffed with assorted long guns, from muskets that might have taken aim at British redcoats to the latest Winchester repeater. Angela suspected the man could tell her the history attached to each weapon, but he did not. Instead,

he sat behind the great oak desk at one end of the room and waved her to one of the chairs in front of it. The desk did nothing to diminish Hawk's considerable bulk; rather, he loomed over it, a craggy mountain, rising over a plain, his head of curled white hair a crown of thunderheads. His voice was deep, the promise of a coming storm. Although there was a decanter full of undoubtedly fine whiskey and a pair of tumblers on the right hand side of the desk, he did not pour himself a glass, nor did he offer to do so for Angela. He said, "Most of the territory from the Kansas border to what formerly was Denver is mine. Even after the Army drove the creatures of the Break back to the city and its surroundings, no one who held property in these parts had much desire to retain it. No one could blame them. There were plenty of things that escaped the military's push west, and while editorials back east might exhort the residents of these parts to remember their pioneer heritage, none of that legacy included herds of ticks the size of hound dogs and other, worse, creatures. I bought their houses and land for less than their owners had paid for them, but not for as little as I might have. The men and women took my money and were glad of it.

"I wanted the land to graze cattle on. Prior to the calamity of the Break, I had enjoyed some success with a modest cattle farm in Kansas. I confess, the idea was not mine; it was the brainchild of my late wife, Evelyn. In that, as in so many matters, my beloved was correct. I, who had spent my adult life as a soldier, had a knack for the cattle business. After the Break, my friends in the Army described the vast swathes of land standing abandoned. Naturally, there had been ranches on some of it, but their livestock had been consumed by the various beasts that had rampaged across them. I saw an opportunity. I made inquiries. I acquired properties close to the Kansas line. I placed small groups of cattle on them, as close to the local Army fort as I could. In exchange for their vigilance, I sold them my beef at a discount. There were mishaps, setbacks, but my business grew, my holdings expanded, and I accumulated a great deal of wealth.

"Of late, I've become interested in a new enterprise. Three years this past September, a sudden snowstorm blew in. Temperatures plunged; you couldn't see two feet in front of you. It happens in these parts. The storm lasted a day and a night. There wasn't much anyone could do during that time except shelter in place and stay warm. In the middle of the storm, a

few dozen head of my westernmost herd became separated from the rest. It took us until a day after the storm departed to discover their absence, and another day after that to track them. All but four were dead, taken by either the weather or Dire Wolves. Each of the four surviving cattle had been wounded, but not severely enough to warrant putting down.

"You know the rules about such things, though. If there's a risk of infection from a foreign agent—which there certainly was, not just a risk but a certainty—then the animal in question must be destroyed and the carcass burned. It's a policy I have endorsed and followed, to a fault, the only way to keep at bay the diseases that have come through the Break. There should have been no hesitation on my part. I should have shot the cattle myself, or had the men who'd helped me track them do so. I did not. An idea had been forming in my mind for some time—well before this incident. I wondered if any of the animals injured in these kinds of attacks ever failed to succumb to the afflictions they invariably transmitted. Rumor has it there is a scattering of men and women confined to hospitals across the country who have not died of the Break illnesses. The government deems releasing them too great a risk, so they remain in quarantine. Most likely, the stories were only that, fictions, but the possibility they suggested intrigued me. Already, the cuts and bites on the cattle were beginning to heal, and none of them was showing the early symptoms of disease. I decided to hold off on their slaughter. I moved them to one of my more out-of-the-way holdings, and assigned the men who had found them with me to guard them. I gave them strict instructions to shoot any animal that sickened.

"None of the cattle did. I waited three months, and added half a dozen new animals to the group. These cattle did not fall ill as a result of their contact with the injured ones. In fact, they bred with them. Following the births of those calves, all of which were healthy, I performed another experiment. A cow from one of my other herds was showing early symptoms of the disease called the Melt. I had this sick animal transported posthaste to the trial cattle. It died, as did all six of the cattle I had introduced to the original quartet. Those cattle, however, together with their offspring, survived; in fact, they showed not the slightest indication of the sickness. It appeared I had stumbled onto something; although I have yet to determine its exact parameters. To how many of the Break illnesses are these cattle immune?

Down how many generations may this immunity be passed? Can the meat from this herd bestow their immunity of those who consume it?

"You can appreciate the implications the answers to these questions may have for me, for my business. Cattle able to withstand some or all of the new sicknesses would be a tremendous asset. Cattle whose flesh could permit men and women the same benefit would be worth their weight in gold, in diamonds. Once it was safe to do so, I moved fresh cattle in with the resistant ones and set to work building my new herd in earnest.

"All was proceeding according to plan until last month. Over a succession of days and nights, what had been a thriving group of cattle was attacked by creatures the men guarding them had not seen before. They burst up from the ground without warning, killed two of the calves and dragged them back underground with them. It was the calves they preferred, though they took a cow one afternoon. Killed a bull, too, when he tried to fend them off. The men watching the herd shot at the creatures, but I selected them more for their loyalty and their ability to keep their mouths shut than I did their skill with firearms. For the same reason, I cannot ask them to pursue the things that savaged my herd."

"Nor can you involve the Army," Angela said, "because they might figure out what you're up to, and put a stop to it."

"It goes against conventional wisdom, I know, but there are limits to what money and position allow a man."

"Why not destroy the cattle yourself? If they're what these creatures are after, then that should stop their raids. Plus, you'd be spared worrying about the Army finding out."

"Circumstances may yet bring me to that decision," Hawk said, "but I prefer to exhaust other options first."

"Such as advertising a Midas-sized bounty for whoever can halt the attacks on your livestock by 'ferocious creatures hitherto unknown.'"

"Precisely."

"Have you disclosed the details of your breeding experiment with the others who've responded to your ad?"

“No. To be blunt, none of them has impressed me as having much chance of locating the creatures, let alone living through an encounter with them. If by some miracle one of them succeeds, I’ll send them on their way with more money than they’ve ever seen before.”

“Why tell me? Because I can promise you, I stand an excellent chance of tracking and killing the creatures, and of living to tell the tale.”

“I had heard you were confident. You are also correct. Your reputation precedes you. I assume that the more information I provide you, the more it will assist you in completing this task as quickly as possible. As for placing my trust in you: I wonder if you would share with me a few details of your most recent employment?”

“I would not.”

“Yes, of course, you’re trying to prove a point, based on our conversation, but what if,” Hawk leaned away from the desk, slid open a drawer, and removed from it a tall stack of bills, which he placed on the surface of the desk between them, “I make my interest more tangible.”

“That is a lot of money.”

“Yes it is, five thousand dollars. Suppose I tell you that, if you provide me information about your last job, you can take this money, walk out of here, and to hell with me and my problems?”

“I’d tell you that was very generous, but I’d still have to decline.”

“What if I told you I already know what took place on Dmitri Grinberg’s orchard? That was his name, wasn’t it? Olga, his wife? My people located them. They were happy to relate the particulars of your work for them—what they knew of them. Something in one of their apple trees, wasn’t it? You needn’t worry: they received a fair price for their story.”

“That’s all very interesting, but it doesn’t change my answer.”

“Would my luck be any better if I asked about one of your more affluent clients? Say, Miss McIntyre? Exactly what was in her hotel’s walls?”

“I fear your luck’s going to remain the same.”

“Fair enough. You justify my faith in your discretion.”

“I’m happy to hear it. Now, I want to ask—”

—Hawk, his great desk, his study, smeared, swirled together as if they were a watercolor across which a pitcher of water had been splashed. Angela was standing in the front doorway of the house in Kansas City, facing inwards, her back to 31st street, whose residences and businesses were in flame. In her right hand, she held the pistol Clay had bought when the newspapers reported the failure of the Army's latest effort to halt the advance of the monsters spreading east from the Rockies, from a mining accident that had opened a door to a place populated by the denizens of a nightmare. At the other end of the hallway through the center of the house to the kitchen, a misshapen form stumbled on legs too thin to support the tumored mass of its torso. The only light was the red-orange glare of the fire roaring around the surrounding buildings, which cast her shadow down the hall in a long black obelisk. Despite the inferno's noise, she could hear the steady hiss from the kitchen, as the shape moving drunkenly from side to side crumbled into fine sand. She aimed the Schofield at the figure, squeezed the trigger—

—and was gasping on the ground, in front of the cave to which she had tracked the creatures that had attacked Hawk's cattle. To her right, the Jellied Time shuffled away, its transparent sides flickering with images from her memories: a burning house, the bar in the Gates of Perdition, the head of a wolf mounted on the wall of Hawk's study. She fumbled for her gun. It was difficult to say how long she'd been in the Jelly's embrace. Half an hour? The sun was still out, but had slid nearer the horizon. Long enough for Petty and his men to work their way down the ridge, cross to the boulders where she was concealed, and prepare an attack? That would have been her play, to act boldly. From everything she'd heard of Petty, he favored caution, but the amount of money at stake might be enough to incite an otherwise-careful temperament to daring. She rolled onto her stomach, raised up on her hands and knees, lifted her head to the top of the boulder, and peeked over it.

Right away, she ducked, a chorus of shots cracking the air, the bullets whizzing overhead, ricocheting off the rock. So Petty had opted to be brave. This volley had come from much closer. There was a bravo on either side of the tall boulder beyond this one, and another pair to either side of them. Petty must be sheltering behind the rock with the remaining men. Not the worst odds she'd faced, but not far from it.

She pointed her pistol straight into the air and fired three times. Whoever hadn't shot at her yet did so now. While the air was still singing with the noise, Angela heaved to her feet and ran in a crouch for the cave. The interior sloped down at a precarious angle; she threw herself forward and slid along it head-first, riding an avalanche of dirt and stones to the bottom. She came to halt in a clatter of rocks and a cloud of dust. Coughing, she stood, the Schofield pointed at the cave mouth above, and surveyed the space into which she'd descended.

It was the size of a small church, the ceiling flat, the floor sinking to a pit in which were heaped the bones of Runyon Hawk's cattle, in the midst of dozens of skeletons of smaller animals. The faint stink of spoiled blood hung in the air. Openings to three tunnels pierced the chamber's walls at what Angela estimated north, west, and south. In between the entrances, the rock surface was covered in thick scratches, claw marks that almost seemed to form a pattern, characters in an alien alphabet. Her Schofield still trained on the cave mouth, she moved around the perimeter, until she was beside the north tunnel. There, she lowered her gun and reloaded it.

The rattle of stones announced Petty's men above. "Careful!" One of them said. "You're like to fall in and break your damn neck."

"Any sign of her?" Petty asked.

"Not so's I can see," another man said. "But it looks pretty big. Could be, she's hiding."

"Do you think so?" Petty said. "Really? She's hiding from us? What an observation."

"I'm just saying is all," the man said.

"Is that you, Mr. Petty?" Angela called.

"You know it is, Sweet Angie Tailor," Petty called back.

"I'm afraid I've had an accident."

"Oh? You don't say."

"I do. In trying to escape you and your friends, I've injured my right leg."

"Not enough to prevent you moving."

"It's amazing what the fear of being shot can motivate a person to do."

“I don’t deny it,” Petty said. “Is there a reason for you disclosing your disadvantage to me?”

From within the tunnel next to her, Angela heard a distant thrum. “I don’t reckon I can complete this job myself,” she said. “I was hoping you might be amenable to a partnership.”

“What kind of partnership, exactly?”

“Fifty-fifty.”

Petty laughed. “Fifty-fifty? For what, may I ask?”

“For leading you to this place, for one thing.”

“Two of my men are excellent trackers. We would have found the creatures’ lair without you.”

The thrumming was increasing in volume. “Maybe you would and maybe you wouldn’t have,” she said. “Join up with me for this, and I’ll let you use my name. You can call yourselves Sweet Angie’s Boys. It’ll be good for your business.”

“We pull off this job, collect Hawk’s reward, and I figure we’ll have all the business we want.”

“Would I be better appealing to your gentlemanly sentiments?”

“If I had any,” Petty said. “As I see it, Sweet Angie, your proposal entails my men and I giving you half Hawk’s money for the pleasure of not killing you.”

“Pleasure or privilege,” Angela said, “I don’t suppose you’re too far off.”

“You will understand if I decline your offer,” Petty said. “As you will understand—if not appreciate—what comes next.”

The noise from the tunnel, from the tunnels, had become the rumble of many feet pounding over earth and stone. “As will you,” Angela said.

Rifles in hand, Petty’s men began their descent into the cave, shuffle-stepping the slope in two lines of three, a pair of men remaining at the entrance with their boss. “What the hell is that sound?” one in the front line said. Angela took aim and shot him. The Schofield boomed in the cave’s confines. The man toppled forward. His fellows cringed, glancing about. One in the second line lost his balance and sat down hard. “Over there!” he

shouted, pointing at her. Angela shot at him, missed. The other men brought their rifles up. Angela threw herself to the ground as the din from the tunnels became shapes rushing out of them into the cave, and into the crashing volley fired by Petty's men.

Screams split the air. Two of the creatures fell, a third lurched, wounded. The men shouted, scrambled up the incline. Petty called at them to stay where they were as the men flanking him fired their rifles. One of the creatures collapsed, as did a man in the second line. The mass of creatures —Angela estimated twelve to fifteen of them, each the size of a pony— wheeled in the direction of the cave mouth and rushed uphill towards it. Petty's men threw down their rifles, pulled pistols, knives, hatchets from their belts to meet the creatures' charge. The beasts were armed with long, heavy claws set at the end of thick, powerful forelimbs. There wasn't much to their heads—little more than domed rises between their shoulders—but their bodies were covered in dense fur. They smashed into Petty's men, bearing one down and tearing him asunder with their claws while the man beside him emptied his pistol into their ranks. Gunshots competed with cries animal and human. The men beside Petty had reloaded their rifles; they fired at the horde moving relentlessly closer, halting one of them, then withdrew bayonets from their belts and fixed them to the ends of their weapons. Petty, whom Angela had expected to run, remained in place, aiming his long-barreled revolver at the creatures and hitting most of his shots. Blood poured down the slope, pooled at its foot around the corpses and carcasses sprawled there. Gun smoke hung under the cave's ceiling in a gray cloud. The creatures' numbers had been halved. Petty and the men beside him were all that remained of his company. The men speared the nearest beasts, allowing Petty to reload his pistol. The man on his left slipped in blood, fell, and was overwhelmed by a pair of the creatures. Petty shot both of the things, but it was too late for the man. His comrade missed a stab at a creature that lunged forward, taking his right leg off above the knee. Petty killed the beast, and three more bearing down on him. That left a pair of the creatures struggling to reach him through the bloody remains of their fellows. Petty dropped his sidearm, picked up one of the bayoneted rifles, and drove it through the skull of the nearest beast. However, the blade lodged there, giving the remaining creature the opportunity to sweep

its claws and sever his left arm at the elbow. Petty leapt back, providing Angela a clear shot at the creature, which she took.

The climb to the cave mouth was a slow process, hindered by the bodies clogging the slope, the ground muddy and slippery with blood and gore. Outside, the sky was streaked red and pink and orange with sunset. Angela found Petty propped against the same rock behind which she had sheltered prior to her leap into the cave. He had worked his belt off and employed it to tourniquet the injury to his arm. He might as well not have bothered: the amount of blood that marked his trail here was more than a man could lose and hope to survive. Already, his face was pallid as a corpse's, his fleshy beard withered and curled against his jaw. Only his eyes showed any sign of life, blazing with whatever fuel was left him. His tongue moistened his lips, and he said, "Sweet Angie Tailor, I believe your name is misleading."

"It's ironic, Mr. Petty."

"So it is. I reckon you planned this bloody course of events from start to finish."

Angela opened the cylinder of her pistol and began to reload it. As she did, she said, "Do you know what I used to be, Mr. Petty? Prior to this existence tracking and killing monsters? I was a natural scientist, in Kansas City, of all places. I studied the behaviors of all manner of animals, from small to large. Of course you know they follow certain patterns. After the Break, with its influx of strange new organisms, I came to understand—over time—that these creatures had their routines, too. Discovering the logic of their actions, I could better work out how to deal with them.

"Before I left Runyon Hawk's, I learned the times at which his cattle had been attacked. I had a reasonable idea of the schedule the creatures were keeping. I judged I could turn this to my advantage, arrive at their lair prior to their return to it."

"And use me and my men to do your work for you."

"Men and women are subject to their own laws," Angela said. "After our encounter at the Gates, yours were apparent. Yes, I used them to my advantage. Try not to be too aggrieved. You were planning to kill me."

"I was at that." The light in Petty's eyes was guttering. "Don't imagine I've got too much longer."

“You don’t. If it’s any consolation, I’ll put a bullet in your brain once you’re gone. Just in case you’ve been infected with one of the walking sicknesses.” She snapped the cylinder back into place.

Petty swallowed. “I’d be indebted to you if you did. If you’d do the same for my boys, I’d take it as a kindness.”

“I will.”

He didn’t last long after that. Angela shot his corpse between the eyes, as she did the bodies of the bravos who’d died at the creatures’ claws. She inspected the beasts, noted the thicket of short tentacles around their star-shaped mouths, the eyes that bore an unsettling resemblance to those of the men they had fought. On one of the creatures, she found a set of fingers protruding from the palm of its right paw.

By the time she was done and on her way out of that place, the sky had darkened, the stars flared into view, bright and pitiless.

Madame Painte: For Sale

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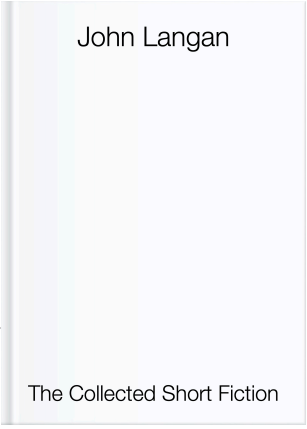

"This?" the man behind the counter says. "Why, this is Madame Painte."

The figure is short, a foot and a half tall, and squat, about the same dimensions across, composed of what might be porcelain. The face is round, the eyes squeezed shut by the wide smile lifting the cheeks. A pointed hat fails to conceal the pointed tips of the figure's ears. It wears a long apron dress over a peasant blouse. A typical garden gnome, you think, except for the colors, from which it obviously derives its name. It's been painted without regard for the margins of clothing and skin. Black, green, and orange slash down the figure from right to left. The face is mostly dark green, the hat orange mixed with black. A splash of white paint traverses the closed eyes; the effect is less a mask and more a piece of webbing. You saw the figure sitting to the left of the door to the antiques shop as you walked up the path to it and were so struck by its remarkable grotesquerie that you lifted and carried it inside, setting it on the front counter. On the way, you read the notecard strung to the top of the hat: MUST BE KEPT OUTSIDE.

"I didn't mean its name," you start.

"Of course not," the man says. He's on the small side, more wiry than slender. Based on the ratio of salt to pepper in his mustache and hair, he's somewhere in the deep middle of middle age. He says, "You meant the warning."

"*Must* be kept outside," you read. "Why must?"

"The official reason is, she's covered in lead paint."

You step back from the counter, wipe your hands on your jeans. "There's an unofficial reason?"

"There's a story," the man says. "Would you like to hear it? It's brief."

“Um. Sure,” you say, but do not move any closer.

“Madame Painte,” the man says, “hails from Holland by way of Guam by way of Australia. She was part of a line of garden ornaments manufactured by a factory outside of Amsterdam in the 1980s. I’m not sure how she traveled to the western Pacific, possibly via cargo ship. I know she was decorating the front lawn of a house in Yigo by 1995. This was the residence of a colonel stationed at the U.S. Air Force base there. She was already sporting her distinctive paint job, though I’m unclear who gave it to her. It may have been the colonel’s wife, whose name was Priscilla. As I understand it, she was an artist—bit of an amateur anthropologist, too. She’s the first person I’m aware of who insisted the figure be kept outside. This was when she sold it to a young Australian couple, Trudi and Lenard Niles, visiting the island. The Colonel had been transferred back stateside, and he and his wife had decided to take the opportunity to thin their possessions. The Nileses—well, mostly Trudi—were quite infatuated with the Madame. Priscilla was reluctant to part with her, said she couldn’t let her go with just anyone. The Nileses thought she was trying to up the price, but that wasn’t it. She’d give the figure away for free to the exactly right person. I guess the young couple wasn’t quite perfect, because she took their money, but they were good enough for her to part with Madame Painte. Only after they’d sworn to keep her outside their home, though.

“This was how the figure made her way from Guam to Canberra.”

“Let me guess,” you say, “the couple brought her inside their house.”

“Not at first, no,” the man says, “but eventually, yes. Initially, they placed her in their back garden, next to a tall Claret Ash. The Nileses had a small metal table and pair of chairs near that spot. When the weather was warm, they would bring their morning coffee there. Trudi was a writer, a travel writer; Lenard was high up in an electronics company. After he went off to the office, she would carry her notebook, and later her laptop, to the table and work on whatever article was due that month. Actually, she wrote an article about the trip to Guam, which is how I know as much as I do about Priscilla and the promise she extracted.”

“What changed?” you say. “I mean, what made the couple break their promise?”

The man shrugs. “I don’t know. I’m not certain anything did change, which is to say, I’m not sure there was a moment when one of them looked at the other and said, ‘The time has come for us to forsake our vow.’ I suspect their promise wasn’t that much to begin with, just words said to get what they wanted. Then one day, years later, they decided to redecorate, and thought their garden ornament would look better in a corner of the living room. If they recalled their conversation with the colonel’s wife, their pledge to her, it was in a bemused, hey-do-you-remember way. They cleaned the dirt and insects off Madame Painte, and brought her inside.”

“And?”

“At first, nothing. As I said, they were redecorating, painting walls, replacing furniture, putting in a new kitchen. For a time, the interior of their house was fairly chaotic. Madame Painte sat in her corner and waited.”

“Waited for what?”

“The right moment. Months had passed. Everything had calmed; the house was in its new configuration. One night, Lenard woke up to use the toilet. On his way back to bed, he saw something on the wall outside the room. It was a splash of white, as if someone had swiped a paintbrush across that spot, or as if moonlight were reflecting off a mirrored surface in the living room. He waved his hand in front of it, which had no effect. He placed his palm against it, but could feel no difference in texture. To the best of my knowledge, he did not notice a resemblance between the white streak on the wall and the white mask Madame Painte wore.

“Next morning, after her coffee and writing, Trudi saw that a patch of the wall beside the bedroom door was discolored, faded the way paint gets after years of direct sunlight. She touched the spot, and it crumbled under her fingertips. She found it strange, especially since the surface had been painted so recently, but she decided it must be some form of dry rot. When she discussed it with Lenard over dinner, he mentioned his late-night vision, but neither drew any conclusions from it. They made plans to call a contractor.

“A couple of days later, Trudi saw the white streak. Once again, it was late at night, the house dark. She had stayed up finishing an article whose deadline she had let draw too near. Walking into the bedroom, she glimpsed

something white draped over the hindquarters of Toro, the Niles's cat, who was asleep at the foot of the bed. So tired was she that she took the white streak for moonlight shining through the venetian blinds; only later would she realize it had been a new moon that night.

"In the morning, Toro was gone from the bed, which was not unusual, and he didn't come for his breakfast, which was. Trudi found him in the garden, when she brought her coffee out there (Lenard had left for an early meeting). The minute she sat, she heard a low moan from somewhere nearby. She recognized it as the cat, but it was a sound he'd never made before, halfway between a complaint and a warning. It raised the hairs on the back of her neck. She stood, called the cat's name. He uttered that weird groan again. She looked around the garden. He wasn't hard to find: what remained of him lay under a bush—some variety of hakea, I think it was."

"What do you mean, 'what remained'?"

"From a little below his midsection, the cat had shriveled, the fur gone, the skin blackened and shrunken against the bone. It was what you might have expected to find had the cat been dead for years. He was panting, obviously in pain, unable to understand what had happened to him. Trudi's first impulse was to take him to the veterinarian, but Toro wouldn't let her near him, hissing and clawing at her as she reached for him. She had to settle for calling the vet, who promised to stop by after her office was closed. By then, it was too late. Toro had bared his fangs at some unseen foe, and breathed his last. The vet was puzzled, to say the least. This degree of atrophy suggested some type of venom, but the speed with which it had acted was, in her experience, unprecedented. She asked to take Toro's remains to her office for an autopsy, which Trudi consented to. As the vet lifted him, though, the cat… came apart. His lower portion crumbled and his insides slid out onto the ground. The vet removed what she could, but it was a messy business."

"Did she find anything?" you say.

"Not exactly," the man says. "She phoned Trudi a day or two later. From what she'd been able to see under the microscope, the cat's cells had collapsed, lost their integrity and dissolved into one another. It's the kind of effect certain kinds of spider venom have on their victim's tissues. There

was more. The worst affected portions of Toro were completely dry, every last drop of moisture drained from them. Of course, Trudi wanted to know what spider or other creature had done this to her cat. The vet didn't know. It was a familiar joke that Australia was full to the brim with deadly wildlife, but nothing she was acquainted with operated in this fashion on mammals of any size. Possibly, they were dealing with an invasive species. She was going to make some calls, ask if anything new had snuck into people's back gardens. In the meantime, Trudi should be careful, and should tell her husband to be careful, as well.

"During the following day, there was a moment Trudi looked at Madame Painte, at the white swath across the figure's smiling face, and was struck by the resemblance between the decoration and the white stripe she had seen on Toro. Hadn't Lenard mentioned a white mark on the wall outside their bedroom? She remembered the promise she'd made to Priscilla. For an instant, the details threatened to cohere into a bizarre and awful whole. As quickly as the thought occurred to her, however, she rejected it. It was ridiculous, absurd, like something from an old horror story. Over dinner that night, she shared the idea with Lenard. He nodded at the coincidence, but dismissed it, as well.

"Do I have to tell you what happened, next? Sometime late in the night, Trudi dreamed she sat up in bed, looked at Lenard asleep beside her, and saw the splash of white traversing his face, from just above his right eyebrow down to the left corner of his mouth. In her dream, she wasn't afraid as much as curious. With the index and middle fingers of her right hand, she touched the white streak where it crossed Lenard's nose. It was like brushing her fingers against a spider web. She lowered her head onto her pillow, and was instantly asleep."

"It wasn't a dream, was it?"

The man shakes his head. "It was not. You can imagine the sight that greeted Trudi when she woke that morning. She ran screaming into the street, and who can blame her? Eventually, the police were called, and the emergency services, but it was all over. The best anyone could do for poor Lenard was opine that at least he hadn't suffered, and how could they be sure? Initially, there was some suspicion of foul play. The idea was that Trudi had murdered Lenard by pouring acid on him while he slept. There

were too many problems with the theory for it to hold up very long, not least of which was the coroner's report. This showed that Lenard had died from something that had liquefied a portion of his face, skull, and brain, then drained the liquid, all without spilling a drop on the pillow. The closest analogue the M.E. could suggest was a spider melting its victim's insides with its venom and slurping them out. But like Trudi's veterinarian before him, he couldn't name an arachnid capable of dissolving and consuming this amount of tissue. Eventually, the cause of death was settled on as a previously unknown strain of MRSA.

"Which was bullshit, but more acceptable than the explanation Trudi was giving."

"Madame Painte."

"To anyone who would listen, she repeated the story that had become overwhelmingly, hideously obvious to her. She refused to re-enter the house, and it wasn't long until she was taken to the hospital, where she was given a bed in the psychiatric ward. No doubt, she was prescribed a sedative, at minimum. When all was said and done, she agreed to return home, but she insisted that the figure be removed from the living room, first. Her doctor decided it was easier to comply with this request than continue to go back and forth with her. Someone—it might have been the psychiatrist, herself—entered the house, located Madame Painte, and brought her to a local charity shop. She went so far as to follow Trudi's instructions and stipulated that the figure must be sold with a warning to keep her outside.

"This was how I found her. The charity shop listed some of its merchandise online. I subscribe to a couple of groups that keep an eye out for unusual pieces. The instant Madame Painte popped up on my screen, I clicked the purchase button."

"Weren't you, I don't know, nervous?"

"No—although that was because I didn't know the full story behind her. Not that I do, now: let's say I didn't know Trudi and Lenard's portion of it. I assumed the instruction to keep the figure outside had to do with the paint that had been used on her. I went so far as to e-mail the charity shop, but they weren't much help. What I've told you I learned from Trudi, who sent

me a long e-mail a few months after I set Madame Painte outside my front door. For weeks, Trudi had been plagued by a combination of guilt and anxiety at passing on the Madame without disclosing her history, until she decided the only thing for her to do was contact whoever had purchased the figure. The charity shop supplied my e-mail, and she wrote me the whole strange, sad story."

"And you believed her?"

"I didn't not believe her. Before I opened this place, I was a cop in Albany for twenty years, and as the saying goes, I've seen some things. Business was slow, which let me do a little digging online. Lenard's death had made national news, briefly, and had sparked a series of articles about the dangers of drug-resistant super-bacteria. Based on the information included in the initial report, I was able to track down the veterinarian, who confirmed the details of Toro's death. In the end, I decided there was nothing wrong with leaving Madame Painte where she was. She seems happy enough watching the front door, and I've noticed a decrease in the local rodent population." The man smiles thinly.

"What do you think, I mean, what is she?"

"Aside from the focal point for a woman who suffered an excruciating loss? I don't know. My father was a big fan of Kipling, Stevenson, and this sounds like the kind of story one of them would have written. White people encounter a cursed object in the mysterious East—which, my older daughter would say, is pretty racist (she's working on her Ph.D. over at Amherst). I suppose it is. I wonder if there mightn't have been something wrong with the figure early on, right after she emerged from the factory. Maybe something attached to her, or was attached to her, whatever the white mask is. Maybe a version of what happened to the Nileses took place in a pretty house beside a canal, and the decision was made to send her far away, to the other side of the earth, where she wouldn't harm any more Dutch folks. Like dumping your supernatural toxic waste in a place whose inhabitants you don't give a rat's ass about."

"Why not just smash her, then, solve the problem that way?"

"What if I let loose whatever's in or on her?"

"Sounds like that's happening already."

“Only if she’s kept inside,” the man says. “Apparently, Priscilla, the colonel’s wife, had her in their garden for years without any problems. There are fewer mice, chipmunks, around, but I can tolerate that”

“You sound like her caretaker.”

“I suppose. That’s one way of looking at it.”

“Then why have her for sale?”

“Because it’s a big responsibility. One I’m not certain I completely believe in, but I feel better erring on the side of caution. I would be happy to pass the care of Madame Painte onto someone I could be satisfied would maintain it with due diligence.

“Now that you’ve heard the story, the question is, is that someone you?”

There is a moment, which is not that long but which will lengthen in your memory, when you think it might be. Not for any good or noble reason, but due to the cause that chased you out of your house this morning, sent you driving east on the thruway until you took the first exit for Albany and wound up here: your grandfather, ninety-two, who lives in the basement apartment under you and your spouse’s home. His brain clotted by dementia, but his body strong from a lifetime of construction work, he has been expelled from the last three nursing homes to which you’ve brought him. He can live on his own, he insists. Surrendering to necessity, you and your spouse have refurbished the basement to a reasonably safe space for him, from which he nonetheless flees once a week, usually to the next-door neighbors’, to whom he appeals for protection from the strangers he says have kidnapped and imprisoned him. This is not to mention the daily trials, the small acts of meanness, vindictiveness, the piss and shit left on the bathroom floor, the stale and rotten food hidden under the bed and in the cushions of his easy chair, the sudden insults and rages. He could live another ten years, his doctor has said, he could give up the ghost tomorrow. You didn’t sign up for this, you’ve said to yourself with increasing frequency, neither of you signed up for this.

Madame Painte might be the solution to your dilemma. Yes, the story is likely so much fantasy, but suppose it isn’t? Just suppose. Your grandfather wouldn’t have to know she was there. You could wait till he’s asleep, hide

her in his bedroom closet. Didn’t the man say Lenard hadn’t felt any pain? Plus, how would—how could—such a thing be traced back to you?

The wave of horror that sweeps through you carries the, “No, it isn’t,” from your mouth before you realize you’ve said it.

“That’s all right,” the man says. “Feel free to keep browsing. I’m sure you’ll appreciate, I’d like to return the Madame to her proper place.”

“Sure,” you say, your face burning with shame.

For politeness’s sake, you spend a few minutes wandering the shop’s narrow aisles while its proprietor carries the figure out to the front step. Once he’s behind the counter again, you depart the antique shop at something close to a run. The man nods to you as you pass him; in reply, you lift your left hand in a half-wave.

You can’t help yourself: as you hurry up the front walk, you cast a glance over your shoulder at Madame Painte. She smiles her closed-eye smile at you, as if she knows you’ll be back.

My Father, Dr. Frankenstein

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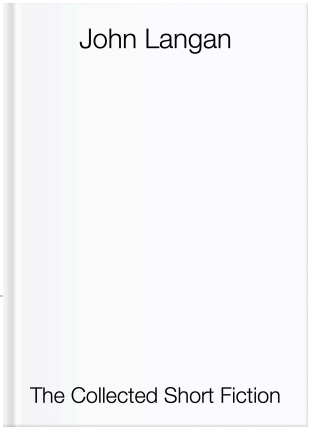

Hi Dena,

Here are the endnotes for my review of Dan Franklin's *My Father, Dr. Frankenstein*. I'm afraid I may have gone a bit overboard in providing historical context for Franklin's book, but I think it's useful for understanding the circumstances under which Josiah Franklin undertook his research. Dan Franklin's account of his struggles with addiction—not to mention, what sounds like some form of schizophrenia—is compelling, but it assumes a great deal of background knowledge about his father and the man's work that I'm not sure the average reader has. Despite Josiah Franklin's reputation within the scientific community, and the books that have been written about him already, his life and career are more specialized subjects.

Anyway, feel free to include these as you see fit. Hope all's well.

Best,

John

ENDNOTES

1. Daniel Franklin's description of his father as Dr. Frankenstein is more indicative of his sentiments towards the man from whom he had been estranged so long and so bitterly than it is an accurate comparison. As presented in Mary Shelley's famous novel (1818, rev. 1831), Victor Frankenstein discovers the means for reanimating dead tissue and then cannot resist following his discovery to its logical end. By and large, the various cinematic incarnations of the scientist, from Colin Clive (1931) to Kenneth Branagh (1994), have been faithful to this initial conception of

him. If such literary allusion truly is necessary, then it might be better to focus on Dr. Moreau, the titular figure in H.G. Wells's *Island of Dr. Moreau* (1896). Moreau's focus on manipulating animal life places him in relative proximity to the projects with which Josiah Franklin occupied himself. Of course, Franklin and Frankenstein sound similar enough to justify Daniel Franklin making a kind of half-pun; that, and the monstrous outcomes of his father's first experiments.

2. The exact quotation is found in James Whale's *Bride of Frankenstein* (1935), where it is uttered by the sinister Dr. Pretorius: "To a new world of gods and monsters!" One may hear in the toast an echo of Shakespeare's, "O brave new world, / That has such people in't" (Tempest V.1.205-206).

3. Josiah Franklin's concern—even obsession—with the end of the world has been traced to a variety of sources. Although Daniel Franklin insists that his father had left his religious upbringing long behind, in favor of what he calls a "quasi-pagan agnosticism" (45), this may be underestimating the matter. Gunterson has pointed out that the faith of Josiah's childhood, Seventh-Day Adventism, places a good deal of emphasis on the Apocalypse, which it envisions within a particularly American context (32). Similarly, Daniel Franklin spends only a few pages on his paternal grandfather, Samson, noting that the man partook of the mania for bomb shelters that swept the nation during the 1950s. Yet, as Molloy emphasizes, Samson Franklin's experiences in the Second World War lent the construction of his backyard shelter a real urgency (11). A private in the United States Army, Samson was part of the forces that occupied Japan after its surrender. Stationed near Hiroshima, he had a first-hand view of the devastating effect of what would now be called a weapon-of-mass-destruction, and he shared some of what he saw with his oldest son—who in turn passed the stories on to his son. While Daniel Franklin discounts the significance of the Cuban Missile Crisis (1962) to Josiah's development, it is hard to believe that the threat of nuclear annihilation would not have had a profound effect on someone of his particular upbringing.

4. See William Butler Yeats "The Second Coming" (1920).

5. Far-fetched as the idea may appear now, the global cooling scenario originally was presented in a more restrained, even understated manner (e.g. Kukla and Matthews's "When Will the Present Interglacial End?" [1972]).

It took a figure such as Nigel Calder to transform speculation about long-term climate change into anxiety over a “snowblitz,” a sudden, catastrophic shift in the weather that would usher in a new ice-age in a matter of decades, as opposed to centuries or millennia. Calder’s work at the beginning of the 1970s was complemented at the other end of the decade by a group designating itself “The Impact Team,” which further popularized the idea of an incipient ice-age in 1977’s *The Weather Conspiracy: The Coming of the New Ice Age*. (A dramatization of such a drastic change forms one of the crucial scenes in the film, *The Day After Tomorrow* [2004], in which the young protagonist must literally outrace a sudden freeze. This suggests that the idea of the snowblitz retains something of its potency.) There is no reason to doubt Daniel Franklin’s assertion that his father, pursuing post-doctoral work at M.I.T., did not take the idea of a snowblitz seriously. That said, the prospect of a global catastrophe, even a fictional one, clearly struck a chord with Josiah. If nothing else, it prompted him to his first, sustained speculation as to how the human form might be altered to meet the challenges of an environment grown hostile—how, as Josiah put it, “evolution might be hurried up.”

6. A copy of the paper may be read online through the Franklin archive at the University of Boulder (c.f. http://ucblibraries.colorado.edu/archives/franklin/surmounting-the-snowblitz/).

7. The word “bionic” was originated by American physician and retired U.S. Air Force colonel Jack E. Steele. Originally, Steele intended the term to describe the study of biological mechanisms as a means of solving challenges in mechanical engineering. However, the word’s meaning expanded to include the use of artificial enhancements of and replacements for human organs and limbs. In no small part, this was due to the success of Martin Caidan’s novel, *Cyborg* (1972), and the TV series it subsequently inspired, *The Six Million Dollar Man* (1973-1978). Inspired by Steele’s ideas, Caidan created an astronaut gravely injured when his vehicle crashes, whose right arm, legs, and left eye are replaced by mechanical equivalents, which provide him with a number of augmented abilities. Despite the term’s more colorful associations, bionics has remained an active field of study, both in its general and specific senses, since its inception.

8. As the apex predator of the Arctic region, the polar bear (*Ursus maritimus*) was not an unreasonable model for Josiah Franklin's "modified human form." Skilled hunters, the bears are also equipped with extensive fat reserves, which allow them to survive periods when no prey is to be found. Their fat combines with tough skin and layers of fur to insulate the bears from punishingly cold temperatures. Franklin's paper suggested using bionics essentially to graft what he viewed as the bear's most significant features onto a human being. A course of steroid injections would increase muscle mass. Hands and feet would be surgically enlarged, to improve load distribution on frozen surfaces and to improve swimming. Nails would be replaced with claws fashioned from a neutral metal (probably a titanium alloy). What Franklin called a "pseudopelt" would be attached to the skin through an extensive network of sutures. Composed of a breathable under layer covered with two layers of synthetic fur, the pseudopelt was intended for the frigid climate of the new frozen globe. Plastic surgery to the head would reduce the ears—and their potential for frostbite—and shape the brow to provide better protection from the glare of sunlight on snow and ice. Franklin weighed enlarging the jaw to insert additional teeth (polar bears have forty-two), but decided the extra teeth were unnecessary. The principal challenge to his design, Franklin wrote, lay in replicating the bear's considerable fat supplies. In order for the typical human to have sufficient fat stores to survive a significant time without food, other elements of the organism must be compromised, to a dangerous degree. In the absence of equivalent reserves of fat, his modified human would require near-constant access to substantial amounts of food. While Josiah's paper went largely unnoticed by his peers, it did attract the attention of the Department of Defense, which contributed increasing amounts of funding to his next several projects.

9. "Sasquatch," of course, is an Anglicization of the Halkomelem name for the cyptid popularly known as Bigfoot. Daniel Franklin's use of the word to describe the end result of his father's proposal is another indication of his sentiments towards the man and his work. His speculation concerning the connection between his father's trips to Colorado and the reported sightings of Sasquatch in the area should not be taken seriously.

10. Although the prospect of nuclear war had been present since the Soviet Union successfully detonated an atomic bomb on August 29, 1949, there had been instances when such a conflict appeared likely, even imminent. As early as the Korean War (1950-1953), the U.S. Strategic Air Command sent ten B-29s carrying unarmed atomic bombs to the U.S. territory of Guam for possible use against the Soviet-backed North Korean forces. U.S. President Harry Truman admitted in a November 1950 press conference that he had contemplated using these weapons, and while he never did, such an admission did little to ease global anxieties about the possibility of nuclear conflict. Within the United States, fears of a nuclear exchange with the Soviet Union led to widespread construction of public and private bomb shelters, such as the one Josiah Franklin's father, Samson, built in the backyard of the family home in Boulder, Colorado (see Molloy for a fuller discussion of this). From October 16-28, 1962, the Cuban Missile Crisis brought the U.S. and the U.S.S.R. to the brink of nuclear war, and while the immediate aftermath of the crisis saw both sides implement measures to lessen the chances of such a situation repeating itself (i.e. the establishment of a hotline between Washington, DC and Moscow), it was by no means the end of nuclear tensions between the nations. In addition, the People's Republic of China successfully tested a nuclear weapon on October 16, 1964, and although their nuclear arsenal was not as extensive as the Soviet Union's, it further complicated the international nuclear situation. During the 1980s, as U.S. President Ronald Reagan and British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher embraced a more confrontational stance towards the U.S.S.R., tensions again increased. The shootdown of Korean Air Lines flight 007 by Soviet jets on September 1, 1983 dramatically heightened tensions between the United States and the Soviet Union, as did NATO exercise Able Archer 83 two months later (indeed, a number of historians of the Cold War have argued that the NATO war game brought the world as close to nuclear war as it had been since the Cuban Missile Crisis, as certain Soviet leadership elements viewed the exercise as a cover for the preparation of an actual nuclear attack). Although the second half of 1983 would mark the last significant flare up in Cold War hostilities, for Josiah Franklin, now affiliated with the U.S. Army Natick Soldier Research, Development & Engineering Center (NSRDEC) in Natick, MA, these events appeared to presage imminent nuclear war. As a result, he suspended

his work on the enhanced combatant program (see Gunterson) to devote his efforts towards modifying the human form to maximize its chances of surviving a post-nuclear-conflict world.

11. First broadcast in November of 1983 to an estimated audience of 100 million viewers, the ABC television movie, *The Day After*, dramatized the effects of a nuclear exchange between the U.S. and the U.S.S.R. on two communities in the American Midwest. In his memoirs, President Ronald Reagan credited the film with influencing his decision to engage in the negotiations with the Soviets that would lead to the 1987 Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty. For Josiah Franklin, the movie was "a hellishly evocative depiction of the nightmare I work day and night to find a pathway through" (quoted in Molloy).

12. The lyric is from Barry McGuire's 1965 song, "Eve of Destruction."

13. A redacted copy of the paper may be read online through the Franklin archive at the University of Boulder (c.f. http://ucblibraries.colorado.edu/archives/franklin/a-nuclear-metamorphosis/). A version of the essay was rejected by the editors of *Would the Insects Inherit the Earth and Other Subjects of Concern to Those Who Worry About Nuclear War*, who described it as "too fanciful" for their book.

14. Since Wilhelm Röntgen's discovery of X-Rays in 1895, the diagnostic applications of radioactive elements have been part of medical research and practice. As early as 1896, Leopold Freund employed X-Rays in a therapeutic fashion to remove a mole from a patient. In the first decades of the twentieth century, a host of over-the-counter health supplements containing radioactive substances were advertised as treating conditions including arthritis, rheumatism, and constipation. Several leading scientists, most notably Marie Curie, cautioned against such drugs, arguing that the effects of prolonged exposure to radioactive elements were poorly understood. By 1927, Hermann Joseph Muller had established the relationship between irradiation and heightened risks of cancer and genetic mutation. (He would be awarded the Nobel Prize in Medicine for his research in 1946.) From the 1950s, radiation therapy became one of the principal avenues of treatment for cancer; though with increasing concern for the consequences of the therapy on the patient's potential offspring.

15. Muller's experiments irradiating fruit flies with X-Rays to explore the effects on their genes were cited by Franklin as one of the inspirations for his proposal.

16. While Josiah Franklin had no formal plans to engage in mapping the human genome, the enterprise became necessary once he decided to focus his research on modifying human embryos. (A series of early experiments using radioactive materials to selectively mutate mature individuals had ended in a catastrophe, which resulted in closed-door Congressional hearings that put Josiah's career in serious jeopardy, and which have spawned a host of urban legends concerning his "monster men" [see Gunterson]). Franklin's research coincided with the first years of the Human Genome Project, which developed from a series of workshops and essays by leading scientists on the topic during the mid-1980s. The official enterprise began in 1990, its co-founders the U.S. Department of Energy and the National Institutes of Health. An international consortium of scientists from nations including the U.K., France, and China contributed to the process, whose target date for completion was set for fifteen years. However, a preliminary map was completed in 2000, five years ahead of schedule, while the final map appeared two years early, in 2003. Because of the nature of his work, Josiah Franklin's contributions to the project had to be made through a series of intermediaries. As a result, it is difficult to evaluate his claim that his research helped bring the mapping to its early conclusion; though it seems an exaggeration.

17. Anecdotal reports of the atomic blast sites at Hiroshima and Nagasaki listed cockroaches among the first organisms to return to the areas. This gave rise to the popular notion that, in the aftermath of a nuclear war, those insects would inherit what was left of the earth, an assertion that was repeated in an interview given by H. Bentley Glass to the *New York Times* in 1962 and that subsequently achieved the status of quasi-fact. The insects are quite hardy, able to survive up to 62,500 REM, as compared to just 800 REM for humans. Additional insects can withstand higher levels still—the Parasitic Wasp *Habrobracon hebetor* can endure 180,250 REM—but Josiah Franklin found a number of other advantages to cockroach physiology that caused him to select the insect (specifically, the American cockroach [*Periplaneta americana*]) as the model for his second modified human

form. Through targeting of specific genes with infinitesimal amounts of what he called his radiation cocktail, Franklin intended to cause a human embryo to mutate in certain pre-determined directions. For example, the skin would develop as a harder surface, strengthened by elevated amounts of calcium carbonate and made water-resistant by wax secreted from its pores. The jaw and teeth would be reinforced, the interior of the mouth and upper digestive tract toughened, to allow the consumption of a wider range of sustenance, while the mid- and lower digestive tract would be adjusted to allow nutrition to be drawn from less promising fodder. Augmentation of the bone marrow would enable it to produce a glycerol-based "antifreeze" in the event of the severely cold temperatures accompanying the inevitable nuclear winter. The most significant change Franklin proposed, however, was to the rate of cell division throughout the body. Humans are vulnerable to radiation because it interferes dramatically with ongoing cell replication, disrupting it to lethal effect. The cockroach, in comparison, undergoes cell division at a profoundly slower pace, approximately once a week, which limits the damage radiation can cause. Thus, after an initial period of rapid growth, the cells in Franklin's modified human form would replicate at a substantially reduced rate. This would result in a smaller organism; Franklin estimated its average height as just over one meter.

18. Although Josiah Franklin's proposed modification chamber was microscopic in scale, his son has a point: it is hard not to be struck by the resemblance to the famous laboratory set in James Whale's *Frankenstein* (1931).

19. Perhaps the single-greatest challenge to Josiah Franklin's plan for his post-nuclear-conflict-humans was that of timing. Even in the case of a "snowblitz," there would be adequate time to alter human beings to meet the changed environment; in the case of a nuclear war, however, civilization would be in smoking ruins before the necessary procedures could be performed. Franklin's proposed solution was the creation of a small population of his modified humans well in advance of any conflict. This would allow ample time to raise and educate a sufficient number of them to counter any sudden catastrophe. While Daniel Franklin enjoyed frightening his middle- and high-school friends with stories about the monsters his father kept in their house's extensive basement—and while he hints at

actually having witnessed *something* under their residence in Natick—there remains no credible evidence to support any of these claims.

20. The Cold War came to an end over a two-year period that began on November 9, 1989 with the fall of the Berlin Wall and concluded on December 26, 1991 with the dissolution of the Soviet Union. While both the United States and the members of the Russian Federation maintained their nuclear arsenals, the symbolic "Doomsday Clock" of the *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* was set back to seventeen minutes to midnight, the furthest from that time and the catastrophe it represents the clock's hands ever have been. Despite this, Josiah Franklin continued work on his post-nuclear-war modified human until 1998, when U.S. President Bill Clinton ordered a review of biological threats to the country. Franklin's participation in the review was minimal, yet it spurred him to put aside the research that had consumed him for the last decade and a half in favor of a new project designed to address this new danger. The extent to which Daniel Franklin's increasingly erratic behavior had distracted his father, with the result that he failed to appreciate the full implications of the end of the Cold War, is difficult to gauge; though certainly Daniel's struggles with heroin addiction throughout the early and mid-1990s—resulting in a series of stays in rehab facilities—occupied a significant portion of his father's attention.

21. Ironically, the end of the Cold War revealed the extent of the former U.S.S.R.'s biological weapons programs. Although the U.S.S.R. was a signatory to the 1972 Biological Weapons Convention, whose express purpose was to prohibit the production of bioweapons, this had little effect on their actual activities. These were overseen by the Biopreparat, a nominally civilian bureaucracy that managed a series of secret laboratories, each dedicated to developing a different biological pathogen for military use. Documents whose release was approved by Russian President Boris Yeltsin in 1992 disclosed efforts at weaponizing the anthrax bacterium (*Bacillis anthracis*), the accidental release of which in Sverdlovsk (now Yekaterinburg) in 1979 led to at least one hundred fatalities from "Anthrax 836." A 1995 report indicated that the Soviets, building on research captured from the Imperial Japanese army at the end of the Second World War, had spent decades working towards a weaponized smallpox virus

(*Variola major*), finally succeeding by using a strain of the disease retrieved from the 1967 Indian outbreak (and christened “India-1967”). Also in 1992, Yeltsin ordered all biological weapons within Russia destroyed, but numerous analysts agree that his directive was almost certainly disregarded, in part if not in whole.

22. The United States’ biological weapons program was approved by President Franklin Roosevelt in 1942; the following year, the U.S. Army Biological Warfare Laboratories were established at then-Camp Detrick in Maryland. For the next quarter-century, the U.S. military worked on enhancing the effectiveness of many of the same pathogens as their Soviet counterparts. Although the United States did not suffer the same weapons-related accidents as the U.S.S.R., there was substantial testing of biological agents on unwitting subjects, many of them in the U.S. military. In addition, there were accusations of U.S. use of biological weapons during the Korean War, and against livestock targets in Cuba in the 1960s; though these charges remain subject to debate. (The extent of Josiah Franklin’s knowledge of these events is unclear. The position he took at Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency [DARPA] in Arlington, Virginia in 1995 would have permitted him access to a significant amount of classified information.) The U.S. bioweapons program came to its end in 1969, when President Richard Nixon officially ended it and ordered all stockpiles of biological agents destroyed. This was accomplished by 1973. Since then, the official position of the United States government has been that any research it conducts in this area is purely defensive in nature; though concerns continue to be raised about the exact parameters of that study.

23. In 1984, members of the Rajneeshee group deliberately contaminated salad bars in the Oregon city of The Dalles with home-grown *Salmonella Typhimurium*. This was done in order to influence the outcome of a local election in which the group had a stake. Seven hundred and fifty-one people were affected, forty-five of them hospitalized. No one died as a result of the attack, but Josiah Franklin saw the group’s actions as demonstrating the frightening ease with which a non-state actor could obtain and employ a biological pathogen, to potentially devastating ends.

24. Published in 1994, *The Hot Zone: A Terrifying True Story* grew out of an article *New Yorker* writer Richard Preston had contributed to the

magazine in 1992, “Crisis in the Hot Zone.” The article focused on the 1989 Reston Incident, during which a number of long-tailed macaques (*Macaca fascicularis*) at the Hazleton Research Products’ Primate Quarantine Unit in Reston, Virginia, were discovered to be infected with a hitherto-unseen strain of *Ebolavirus*. While what would become known as Reston *ebolavirus* was eventually found to be non-threatening to humans, its relationship to the more lethal species of the virus, combined with the research facility’s proximity to Washington, DC, led to a significant portion of the macaques being euthanized. Building on the magazine piece, the book describes a number of viral hemorrhagic infections, details their past outbreaks in sub-Saharan Africa, and speculates on their potential to spread to Europe and the United States. A massive success, the book reached the number one spot on the *New York Times* nonfiction bestseller list. With the benefit of two decades’ hindsight, it seems clear that Preston’s book owed a measure of its popularity to anxieties about the ongoing HIV-AIDS epidemic, which had foregrounded the threat posed by hitherto-unfamiliar viral infections.

25. A heavily-redacted copy of the paper may be read online through the Franklin archive at the University of Boulder (c.f. http://ucblibraries.colorado.edu/archives/franklin/a-symbiotic solution-to-the-coming-plagues/).

26. The origins of nanotechnology can be traced to a 1959 talk by Richard Feynman, “There’s Plenty of Room at the Bottom,” which raised the possibilities for technological advances created by the increasing ability to control individual atoms. Feynman’s ideas were picked up by K. Eric Drexler in his 1986 book, *Engines of Creation: The Coming Era of Nanotechnology*, in which Drexler forecasts a wide-range of applications for nanotechnology, from information storage to human medicine. Drexler’s predictions had been spurred by the development of the scanning tunneling microscope in 1981; while the use of the device to manipulate individual atoms in 1989 appeared to show his ideas in action. As Josiah Franklin already was working at a microscopic level with his embryo modification chamber, the notion of moving to an even smaller scale did not require a significant adjustment in his perspective.

27. With the exception of the scanning tunneling microscope, the necessary technology remains classified by the U.S. Government.

28. For Josiah Franklin, the challenges posed by biological pathogens were considerably more complex than those presented by nuclear weapons (or, for the matter, a sudden ice-age). Depending on the disease, the effects could vary widely, necessitating modifications to the human form that would allow an ongoing adaptive response. As was the case with his previous proposals for altering the human form to meet an apocalyptic threat, Franklin looked to the animal kingdom for inspiration. His focus this time was on the Egyptian plover (*Pluvianus aegyptius*), more popularly known as the "crocodile bird," for its supposed symbiotic relationship with the Nile crocodile (*Crocodylus niloticus*). According to the Greek historian Herodotus, while the crocodiles were resting on the banks of the Nile, they would open their mouths to allow the birds to hop into them. Rather than consuming the plovers, the crocodiles would allow the birds to pick through their teeth for any traces of food left in them. In this way, the birds would feed, and the crocodiles have their teeth cleaned. Although the story of the crocodile bird has not been documented by modern science, it provided Josiah with a conceptual model for his third modified human form. Instead of radically altering human physiology to adapt it to a hostile landscape, he would supplement it with a population of symbiotic organisms designed to assist it in overcoming the most virulent diseases. Research into animal resistance to disease led Franklin to another crocodilian, the American alligator (*Alligator mississippiensis*), whose robust immune system allows it to survive open wounds submerged in swamp water teeming with a host of microorganisms. Through extensive modification using specialized nanomachines, Josiah proposed adapting macrophages isolated from the alligator's blood to enable them to function within human beings. Much of what he envisioned remains subject to DARPA secrecy protocols, but it appears to have involved splicing the animal's white blood cells with the individual human's, in order to avoid rejection by the host. The human appendix would be employed as a kind of reservoir for these augmented white blood cells, a portion of which would be released when the immune system registered a severe enough response to an infection. Outside the customized environment of the appendix, the modified cells would die in a

matter of hours, but this would be ample time for them to destroy whatever disease was present. According to Josiah's calculations, the appendix of a typical adult human could contain sufficient reserves of his adapted macrophages to see that person through half a dozen significant epidemics.

29. Despite Daniel Franklin's accusations, there is no evidence that the 2009 car crash that claimed his father's life in Colorado was anything other than an accident caused by wet leaves and a sharp turn in the road. The quotation is from William S. Burroughs.

30. Approximately six weeks after Daniel Franklin turned in the final copy-edits for *My Father, Dr. Frankenstein*, he was found dead in his apartment in Ellicott City, Maryland, by his landlord. Since completing the manuscript of his memoir in late 2014, Daniel's behavior had grown increasingly erratic, as he struggled against and eventually relapsed into heroin addiction. Whether or not the end of what had been six years drug-free was caused by revisiting the material covered in his book is impossible to say with certainty, but the coincidence is difficult to ignore. Daniel's drug use apparently fostered a growing conviction that he had been experimented upon by his father during his last stay in rehab, leaving him "infested," as he put it, with Josiah Franklin's creations, which Daniel insisted were concentrated in his appendix. (The echo of his father's final project is striking, particularly as the Franklin archive had yet to post the edited version of Josiah's final paper; though it is possible that he had shared some of the details of his work with his son.) Because of the alterations his father had made to him, Daniel said, heroin no longer offered the profound escape it once had. In addition, he felt his consciousness changing in ways he struggled to articulate, but that appeared to involve heightened impulses to aggression and violence. Consultations with a number of physicians failed to reveal any abnormalities in his health, and he could not convince the doctors to conduct exploratory surgery to examine his appendix. Nor did sessions with several therapists yield a resolution to his sense that he had been fundamentally altered. Finally, Daniel Franklin took matters into his own hands, and attempted to remove his appendix himself. After disinfecting his bathroom with bleach and covering it in sterilized sheets, he lay on the floor on his back. Positioning a pair of mirrors to allow him a better view of the surgical site, he swabbed his lower abdomen with iodine,

then injected the area with a mixture of lidocaine and epinephrine. Using a folding lockback knife with a 3¾ inch blade, he made a four inch incision in his abdominal wall. Remarkably, he succeeded in reaching his appendix; once there, however, he sliced the appendicular artery lengthwise, creating a wound that he was unable to suture successfully. The resulting bleeding both complicated his task and gave it added urgency. This likely led to the slip that drove the knife into his external iliac artery. While Daniel Franklin attempted to address this even more serious injury, he had neither the training nor the tools to do so. He lost consciousness in short order, and bled to death on his bathroom floor not long thereafter. When his body was discovered, EMT's were summoned to the scene, but it was too late. The official report mentions that his appendix was found on the floor next to him; apparently, he had succeeded in his final task. What became of the organ afterward is unclear.

Lost in the Dark

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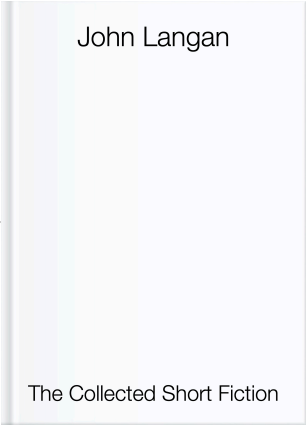

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Ten years ago, Sarah Fiore's *Lost in the Dark* terrified audiences. Now, on the anniversary of the movie's release, its director has revealed new information about the circumstances behind its filming. John Langan reports.

Pete's Corner Pub, in the Hudson Valley town of Huguenot, is a familiar college-town location: the student bar, at whose door aspiring underage patrons test their fake ID's against the bouncers' scrutiny and inside of which every square inch is occupied by men and women shouting to be heard over the sound system's blare. Its floor is scuffed, its wooden tables and benches scored with generations of initials and symbols. More students than you could easily count have passed their Friday and Saturday nights here, their weekend dramas fueled by surging hormones and pitchers of cheap beer.

During the day, Pete's is a different place, the patrons older, mostly there for its hamburgers, which are regarded by those in the know as the best in town. A few regulars station themselves at the bar, solitary figures there to consume their daily ration of alcohol and possibly pass a few words with the bartender. Between lunch and dinner, the place is relatively quiet. You can bring your legal pad and pen and sit and write for a couple of hours, and as long as you're a good tipper, the waitress will keep warming your cup of decaf. The bartender has the music low, so you can have a conversation if you need to.

This particular afternoon, I'm at Pete's to talk to Sarah Fiore. To be honest, it's not my first choice for an interview, but it was the one location on which we could agree, so here I am, seated in a booth at the back of the restaurant. The upper half of the rear wall is an unbroken line of windows that curves inward at the top, for a greenhouse effect. I'm guessing it was

intended to give a view out over the town, but the buildings that went up behind the bar frustrated that design. Still, they provide plenty of natural light, which must save on the electric bill.

It's Halloween, which seems almost too on the nose for the interview I'm here to conduct. Already, small children dressed as characters from comic books, movies, and video games wander the sidewalks, accompanied by parents whose costumes are the same ones they wear every day. I see Gothams of Batmen, companies of Stormtroopers, palaces of Disney princesses, and MITs' worth of video game characters. There are few monsters, which saddens me, but I'm a traditionalist. In a couple of hours, the town will host its annual Halloween parade, for which they'll close the lower part of Main Street. It's quite a sight. Hundreds of costumed participants will assemble in front of the library—just up the street from Pete's—and process down toward the Svartkill River, which forms the town's western boundary. Once there, they'll turn into the parking lot of the police station, where they'll be served cider and doughnuts by members of the police and fire departments, accompanied by the mayor and other local officials. I find it quite sweet.

In the interest of full disclosure, I should add here, while we're still waiting for Sarah Fiore to arrive, that she and I know one another. Specifically, she was my student twenty-one years ago, in the first section of Freshman Composition I taught at SUNY Huguenot. She was in her midtwenties, settling down to pursue a degree after several years of working odd jobs and traveling. She was a big fan of horror movies, wrote several essays about films like *Nosferatu* (the original), the Badham *Dracula,* and *Near Dark.* We spent fifteen minutes of one class arguing the merits of *The Lost Boys*, much to the amusement of her fellow students. After the semester was over, I occasionally bumped into Sarah in the hallways of one building or another, which was how I learned that she was transferring to NYU for its film program. I told her she would have to make a horror movie.

Eleven years later, when *Lost in the Dark* was released, I remembered our exchange. I hadn't seen Sarah since that afternoon in the Humanities building, had no idea how to get in touch with her to offer my congratulations for her good reviews. "A smarter *Blair Witch Project,*" that's the one that sticks in my mind; although the only thing Sarah's film

shares with Eduardo Sànchez and Daniel Myrick's is its reliance on handheld cameras for the faux-documentary effect. Otherwise, *Lost in the Dark* has a much more developed narrative, both in terms of the Bad Agatha backstory and the Isabelle Price main story. The sequels did a lot to perpetuate the brand and helped to add Bad Agatha to the pantheon of contemporary horror villains. Sarah's involvement with these films was limited, but she pushed for J. T. Petty to direct the second, and she reached out to Sean Mickles to bring him in for the third. As a result, you have a trilogy of horror movies by three different directors that work unusually well together. Sarah's sets up the story, Petty's explores the history, and Mickles's does its weird meta-thing about the films. While her name is on the fourth and fifth movies as producer, that had more to do with the details of the contract her agent worked out for her. Recently, there's been talk of a *Lost in the Dark* television series. AMC is interested, as is Showtime. There have been a couple of tie-in novels, and a four-issue comic book published by IDW.

Truth to tell, I think a good part of the continuing success of the Lost in the Dark franchise has to do with its Halloween connections. It didn't hurt the original film to be released Halloween weekend, and whoever thought up giving away Bad Agatha masks to the first dozen ticket buyers was a promotional genius. Plastic shells with a rubber band strap, they were hardly sophisticated, but there was a crude energy to their design, all flat planes and sharp angles. An approximation of the movie's makeup, the masks captured the menace of the character. It's the eyes that do it, especially that missing left one. The bit of black fabric glued behind the opening gives the appearance of depth, as if you're seeing right into the center of Bad Agatha's skull and the darkness therein. The last I checked, one of the original masks was going for four hundred dollars on eBay. The versions that have been released with each subsequent Lost in the Dark installment have varied in execution (though a colleague said that the mask she received was the best thing about the fourth movie), but they've become part of the phenomenon.

Throughout this time, Sarah Fiore has kept herself busy with other projects. She wrote and directed two films, *Hideous Road* (2009) and *Bubblegum Confession* (2011), and was director for *Apple Core* (2012). She wrote and

directed the 2014 Shirley Jackson documentary for PBS's *American Masters,* which was nominated for an Emmy. With Phil Gelatt, she cowrote an adaptation of Laird Barron's "Hallucigenia" that John Carpenter was rumored to be considering. Yet none of these movies or scripts has attached to her name the way the Lost in the Dark series has. For the most part, she's borne this with good grace, expressing in numerous interviews her gratitude for the films' success.

While not inevitable, it's hardly surprising that, in today's short-term-memory culture, any work of art with staying power is going to be milked for all it's worth. In the case of the original *Lost in the Dark,* this means a celebration of the movie's ten-year anniversary. There's a special-edition Blu-ray with an added disc full of bonus features, screenings of the film in select theaters, and a new batch of Bad Agatha masks. Plus, the announcement that Takashi Shimizu has signed on to direct the sixth Lost in the Dark movie, which is supposed to herald a bold new direction for the franchise. None of this is especially remarkable; much lesser films receive much grander treatment.

What is of note lies buried within the fifteen hours of new footage on the Blu-ray's bonus disc. There's a forty-minute group interview during which Sarah and Kristi Nightingale, who was her director of photography, and Ben Formosa, who played Ben Rios, sit around a table with Edie Amos of *Rue Morgue* discussing the origins and shooting of the movie. It's the kind of thing film geeks love: behind the scenes of their favorite film. There's a pitcher of water on the table, a glass in front of each participant. Sarah sits with her elbows on the table, her hands clasped. She's wearing a black linen blouse, her long black hair pulled back in a ponytail. Kristi leans back in her chair, the mass of her curly brown hair springing from underneath an unmarked blue baseball cap. A black-and-white Billy Idol, circa *Rebel Yell*, sneers from the front of her white sweatshirt. Ben has shaved his head, which, combined with noticeable weight loss, gives him the appearance of having aged more than his former companions. The red dress shirt he's wearing practically glows with money, an emblem of the success he's enjoyed in his recent roles. Edie sits with a tablet in front of her. Her oversize round glasses magnify her eyes ever so slightly.

The conversation flows easily, and the first fifteen minutes are full of all sorts of minutiae. Then, in response to a question about how she arrived at the idea for the movie, Sarah looks down, exhales, and says, “Well, it was supposed to be a documentary.”

At what she assumes is a joke, Edie laughs, but the glance passed between Kristi and Ben gives the lie to that. She says, “Wait—”

Sarah takes a sip from her water. “I’d known Isabelle since NYU,” she says, referring to Isabelle Router, who played the ill-fated Isabelle Price. “She was from Huguenot, which was where I’d done my first two years of undergrad. We kind of bonded over that. She knew all about the area, these crazy stories. I was never sure if she was making them up, but any time I went to the trouble of fact-checking them, they turned out to be true. Or true enough. That’s why she was at school, for a degree in cultural anthropology. She wanted to study the folklore of the Hudson Valley.

“Anyway, we kept in touch after we graduated. I landed a position working for Larry Fessenden, Glass Eye Pix. Isabelle went to Albany for her doctorate. There was this piece of local history Isabelle wanted to include in her dissertation. She’d heard it from her uncle, who’d been a state trooper stationed in Highland when she was growing up. Sometime around 1969 or ’70, a train had made an unscheduled stop just north of Huguenot. This was when there was a rail line running up the Svartkill Valley. Even then, the trains were on their way out, but one still pulled into the station in downtown Huguenot twice a day. This was the night train, on its way north to Wiltwyck. It wasn’t very long, half a dozen cars. About five minutes after it left town, the train slowed, and came to a halt next to an old cement mine. A couple of men were waiting there, dressed in heavy coats and hats because of the chill. (It was only mid-October, but there’d been a cold snap that week. Funny, the details you remember.) No less than five passengers said they witnessed a woman being led off the very last car on the train by one of the conductors and another woman wearing a Catholic nun’s veil. None of the passengers got a good look at the woman between the conductor and the nun. All of them agreed that she had long black hair and that a man’s overcoat was draped across her shoulders. Other than that, their stories varied: one said that she had been bound in a straitjacket under the coat; another that she’d been wearing a white dress; a third that she’d been

in a nightgown and barefoot. The woman didn't struggle, didn't appear to notice the men there for her at all. They took her from the conductor and the nun and, guiding her by the elbows, steered her toward the mine opening. Before anyone could see anything more, the train lurched forward.

"I suppose that might've been all, except one of the passengers was so bothered by what she'd seen that she called the police the minute she walked in her front door. The cops in Huguenot didn't take her seriously, told her it was probably nothing, the engineer doing someone a favor. This was not good enough for our concerned citizen, who went on to dial the state police next. Their dispatcher said they'd send someone out to have a look. Isabelle's uncle—what was his name? John? Edward?"

"Richard," Kristi Nightingale says. She is not looking at Sarah.

"Right, Richard, Uncle Rich," Sarah says. "He was the one they sent. It was pretty late by the time he reached the old access road that led to the mine. He told Isabelle he didn't know what to expect, but it wasn't a pair of fresh corpses. He stumbled onto the men ten feet inside the mine entrance. One had been driven forward into the wall with such force, his face was unrecognizable. The other had been torn open."

"Wait," Edie says, "wait a minute. This is real? I mean, this actually took place?"

Sarah nods. "You can check the papers. It was front-page news for the *Wiltwyck Daily Freeman* and the *Poughkeepsie Journal* for days. Even the *Times* wrote a piece on it: 'Sleepy College Town Rocked by Savage Killings.'"

"Well, what happened?"

"Nobody knew," Sarah says. "The whole thing was very strange. Apparently, the dead men were the same guys who had met the woman from the train. It turned out they were brothers who came from somewhere down in Brooklyn—Greenpoint, maybe. I can't remember their name, something Polish. Neither of their families could say what they were doing upstate, much less why they'd been waiting at the mine. Nor was there any trace of the conductor or the nun. All of the convents within a three-hour radius could account for their residents' whereabouts. The conductor who had been working that section of the train was a new guy who didn't return

the next day and whose hiring information turned out to be fake. Of the mysterious woman, there was no trace. The police searched the mine, the surrounding woods, knocked on the doors of the nearest houses, but came up empty-handed.

"There were all kinds of theories floating around. The most popular one involved organized crime. There used to be a lot of Mafia activity in the Hudson Valley. They had their fingers in the local sanitation businesses. Great way to dispose of your rivals, right? The story was, they also used some of the old mines and caves for the same purpose. In this version of events, the woman had been brought to the mine to disappear into it. Whoever she was, she or someone close to her was guilty of a particularly grievous trespass, and this was the punishment.

"But then what? How had she turned the tables on her captors and killed them? Not to mention, in such an…extravagantly violent manner. You could imagine adrenaline allowing her to overpower one of the men, seize his gun, and shoot him and his partner before they had the chance to react. Crushing a man's skull against a rock wall, cracking his friend's chest open was harder to believe. Plus, neither one showed evidence of having been armed.

"Maybe the woman hadn't been there to be murdered; maybe she was there to be traded. She'd been kidnapped, and the mine was the place her abductors had selected to return her to whoever was going to pay her ransom. Or she was a high-class prostitute, being transferred from one brothel to another. Either way, the scheduled meeting went pear-shaped and the men died. It didn't explain why they had done so in such a fashion, but the cops liked it better, it felt more probable to them.

"There were other, wilder explanations offered, too. The dead guys were Polish. This was the end of the sixties, the Cold War was in full swing, and Poland was slotted into the Eastern Bloc. Were the brothers foreign agents? Was the woman a fellow spy who had failed in her duties? Had she been sent here to be liquidated? Then rescued by other spies? Or were the brothers working for the U.S. government, and the woman a captured spy who had to vanish? These weren't the craziest scenarios, either. *Rosemary's Baby* was pretty big at this time, which may explain why some people picked up on the detail of the nun who stepped off the train. Could it be that

the woman had been carrying the spawn of Satan, or otherwise involved in diabolical activities? It would account for the savagery of the brothers' deaths—the devil and his followers are pretty ferocious—if not for what the men had been doing at the mine in the first place. It's been a while since the Catholic Church sanctioned anyone's murder.

"In the end, the investigation dead-ended. Officially, it was left open, but in the absence of any credible leads, the cops turned their attention elsewhere."

Sarah drinks more water. "Within a year or two, the local kids were telling stories about the woman in the mine. Some of them portrayed her as criminally insane, delivered to the place to be kept in a secret cell constructed for the sole purpose of confining her. Other accounts made her a witch, dropped at the mine for essentially the same purpose, imprisonment. Whether she was natural or supernatural, the woman escaped her bonds, slaughtered her jailors, and was now on the loose, ready to abduct any child careless enough to allow her too close. A few years later, when *The Exorcist* was released, the narrative adapted itself to the film, and the woman became demonically possessed, transported upstate for an exorcism, which obviously had failed. It was one of the peculiarities of the story, the way it shaped itself to the current cultural landscape. The woman morphed into a teen with dangerous psychic abilities, an alien masquerading as a human, even a vampire. For older kids, venturing into the mine, especially at night, and especially at Halloween, became a rite of passage. After the railroad stopped running in the seventies, high school and college kids would drive to the access road and hike to the entrance to build bonfires and drink.

"A similar process happens all over the country—all over the world. Something bad happens, and it hardens into the seed for stories about a monstrous character. This was what Isabelle's dissertation director said. There was nothing unusual about the woman in the mine, as the local kids called her. Isabelle disagreed, said she had additional information that distinguished this narrative from the rest. Once again, it involved her uncle, Rich, the cop.

"Ten years to the date after he answered his first call about the mine, he received a second. A group of high school seniors had been partying outside

the entrance, and one of them had gone into it on a dare. That was three hours ago, and there had been no sign of him since. A couple of the other kids started in after their missing friend but could find no trace of him as far as they dared to go. Everybody panicked, and eventually someone who was sober enough drove home and phoned the police. The Huguenot cops were busy with a costume party at one of the university's dorms that had gotten out of hand when someone spiked the punch with acid, so the call was booted to the state troopers. Rich suspected a Halloween prank, probably by the missing kid on his friends, possibly by all the kids on the cops. Despite that, he drove to the access road and made his way on foot to the spot.

"There, he encountered a dozen teenagers, all of them more or less sober, so sick with worry, he decided they must be telling the truth. Flashlight in hand, he set off into the mine to search for their friend. He wasn't nervous, he told Isabelle. Sure, he remembered the bodies of the men he'd discovered a decade before, but he'd seen a lot of dead bodies in the meantime, and if none was quite as bad as those two, a few had come close. The dark had never bothered him, nor did the thought of being underground. He was more concerned about the debris littering the floor: rocks of varying sizes, dusty boxes, rusted bits of old machines, the occasional tool. His feet crushed fast-food containers, kicked the bones of small animals, clanged on an empty metal lunch box. There was one good thing about the clutter—it allowed him to track the missing student without much difficulty.

"He came across graffiti farther inside the mine than he would have expected. He read names of people, sports teams, bands. He saw hearts encasing the names of lovers, peace symbols, even the anarchist A. He stumbled through a heap of beer cans, whose musical clatter wasn't as comforting as he would have liked. Finally, he came upon the portrait."

"Portrait?" Edie says.

"A woman's face," Sarah says, "done in charcoal on a patch of rock about head level. Whoever she was, Rich said, she was striking. Long black hair, high, strong cheekbones, full lips. Her left eye had been smeared, which made it look like a hole into her skull. The artist had given the picture a force, a vitality Rich struggled to define. He said it was as if she were two seconds away from stepping right out of the rock.

“By this point, he was pretty far in. Any sounds of the high school students had long since ceased. He was grudgingly impressed that the kid had traveled this distance. On the right, the tunnel he’d been walking opened on a shallow chamber. He swept his light across it and stopped. There was a bed in there, its metal frame spotted orange with rust from the damp, its mattress black with mold. Lying half on the bed was a long piece of clothing—a straitjacket. He entered the room, lifted the restraint to check it. Mold blotched the material. What wasn’t mold was covered in writing, in symbols. He saw rows of crosses, Stars of David, crescent moons, other figures he didn’t recognize but assumed were religious, too. He held up the straitjacket, passed the light over it. The right front side and sleeve were stained with what he was certain was blood. He replaced the garment on the bed and heard a footstep behind him.

“It was some kind of miracle, Rich said, he didn’t spin around gun in hand and shoot whoever was there, or at least brain them with his flashlight. Of course it was the missing student, who’d gotten himself good and lost in the mine’s recesses and had only come upon Rich through dumb luck. ‘Why didn’t you call for help?’ he asked the kid. Because there was someone else down there, the kid said. A woman. He’d seen her at the other end of one of the tunnels, right before the torch he was carrying guttered out. There was something wrong with her face, and when she saw him, her expression made him turn and run as fast as he could. The student couldn’t say how long he’d been hiding, listening. He’d thought Rich was *her* and had debated fleeing farther into the mine before she saw him. Now that he’d found Rich, it was imperative the two of them exit this place without delay.

“Had he heard the kid’s story outside, Rich told Isabelle, beside the fire he and his friends had built, he would have taken the tale with a block of salt. This far into the mine, the only source of light his flashlight, facing the stone cell with the weird straitjacket, the tale sounded less incredible. The student was all for bolting for the entrance, which Rich nixed. They needed to pay attention to their surroundings, he said, or the kid would find himself lost again, and he didn’t want that, did he? ‘No way,’ the kid said.

“The walk back to the surface took a long time. Rich did his best to remain calm, not let the student’s hysteria affect him, but there was a stretch of tunnel, about halfway to the exit, in which he was suddenly certain he and

the kid were not alone. The hair on the back of his neck lifted, and his mouth went dry. For fear of spooking the student, he didn't want to stop, but the echo of their feet on the walls made it difficult to decide if the sound he thought he was hearing, a whispering noise, like fabric swishing over rock, was more than his imagination. He didn't want to put his hand on his gun, either, though the spot between his shoulders itched, as if something was stalking him and the kid, just a handful of footsteps behind them in the dark. The kid picked up on it, too, and asked him if there was someone else there with them, if *she* had found them. Rich heard the panic rising in the student's voice and said no, it was only the two of them. If the kid suspected him of lying, he didn't say anything.

"At last—at long last, Rich walked the student out of the mine and into the waiting arms of his friends, who were overjoyed at their reappearance. It was all he could do, Rich said, not to look back into the mine. He was afraid he'd see a woman standing inside it, something terribly wrong with her face."

There's a moment of silence, during which both Kristi and Ben fidget. Finally, Edie says, "That's…incredible."

"Isabelle thought so," Sarah says. "A couple of years after that, the stories about the woman in the mine gained a new detail: the left side of her face was scarred. Whether the student Rich had retrieved told his story, or other kids ventured into the mine and discovered the drawing he'd seen, that became part of the description. It didn't hurt that the first *Nightmare on Elm Street* was released around then, with its disfigured villain. The point is, there was something interesting going on, and Isabelle already had enough information to justify further research and analysis. She told me she was planning to make the woman in the mine the center of her dissertation, an instance of the way traditional folk story was affected by the presence and pressure of newer narrative forms. The professor overseeing the project disagreed. She more than disagreed; she told Isabelle her idea was a nonstarter. Instead, she wanted Isabelle to go south, to Kentucky, where there were reports of a lizard monster that had been spotted during a local disturbance at the end of the sixties. It wasn't that Isabelle wasn't interested in the lizard monster, but she had done a lot of work on the other topic, and she didn't want to drop it. Her professor's attitude left her unsure what to

do, scrap what she had and start over, or look for another director who would be more agreeable to her plans. Either way, she was watching the completion of her dissertation recede into the future. Which happens, but is still a bummer.

"Enter me. Through five years of busting my ass, I had convinced Larry that I could and should be trusted with a camera and a small crew. We were searching for the right project. I read a lot of scripts; nothing clicked. I tried writing a couple of screenplays, myself, but they weren't any better. Then one night, I'm talking to Isabelle on the phone. We spoke every couple of weeks, caught up on what each of us was doing. She'd been telling me about the woman in the mine forever, since undergrad. I must have heard the story a thousand times. This particular night, the thousand and first time, things fell into place, and I realized I had my movie right in front of me. I would take Isabelle's research project, and I would put it on-screen. I would make a documentary about the woman from the mine, about the whole weird thing. Isabelle had assembled a huge archive. There were audio interviews with twenty people. There were hundreds of photographs. There were maps. There were police reports, train schedules, articles about mining. Before I even started, I figured I had a good portion of what I needed for my movie. Production costs would be relatively low, which is never a bad thing for a beginning filmmaker. Sure, a documentary wasn't exactly the most exciting debut, but I planned to jazz it up by filming an excursion to the mine. We'd take a look around inside, see if we couldn't find the drawing Isabelle's uncle had described. If we did—or better, if we located the straitjacket—it would give the film an added *oomph.*

"Isabelle didn't need much convincing. She saw the documentary as a middle finger to her professor, a way of demonstrating exactly how wrong the woman was. I doubted it would matter to her; her head sounded as if it was pretty tightly wedged up her own ass. But the idea led Isabelle to sign on with me, so I didn't argue."

"Hold on," Edie says, "hold on. Did you make this? Are you telling me *Lost in the Dark* is a documentary?"

"No," Sarah says, "no, it's—it's more complicated than that." For the first time in the interview, she is flustered. Both Kristi and Ben appear to be barely containing the impulse to bolt. "We went to the mine—this was after

Isabelle and I had put together a rough introduction, twenty minutes laying out the story of the mysterious woman. Her uncle Rich was retired in Tampa, but we interviewed him via phone, and he repeated everything he'd told Isabelle. I had arranged for a professor from SUNY Huguenot who specialized in folklore to sit down for a conversation with Isabelle about the woman.

"First, though, I wanted to shoot our trip. I planned it for Halloween, because how could I not? That was when everything had started, when kids built their bonfires outside the entrance, when Rich had ventured into its tunnels. I had my crew: Kristi on camera, George Maltmore on sound, a couple of film students who'd agreed to do whatever we needed them to. The barest of bones. And Isabelle, who was our guide. I gave George and Isabelle handheld cameras, and Priya and Chad a camera to split between them. I wasn't expecting anyone to catch anything remarkable; I liked the idea of having shots from other perspectives.

"At dusk on Halloween, we entered the mine. I was certain we'd run into kids partying there. In fact, I was counting on it. I wanted it as an illustration of an annual event, a local ritual. But there was no one there. As far as setbacks go, it wasn't bad. After filming the mine's exterior, we walked into it."

Edie waits a beat, then says, "And…?"

"And we came out again," Sarah says. "Eventually."

2

A synopsis of *Lost in the Dark* is simple enough: An academic leads a film crew into an abandoned mine in search of a mysterious woman who disappeared there decades ago. While in the mine, the crew is plagued by strange and frightening incidents, culminating in a confrontation with the missing woman, who is revealed to be a supernatural creature. After she brutally murders most of the crew, the others flee deeper into the mine. The movie ends with the survivors proceeding into the dark, pursued by the woman.

The devil lives in the details, though, doesn't he? After all, you could make a terrible film from such a plot. There are three scenes, I think, on which the

movie's success depends. It seems to me a good idea to pause here a moment and consider them. The IMDb listing for *Lost in the Dark* features what has to be one of the most thorough descriptions of any film listed on the site. At twenty-three thousand words, it's clearly a labor of love. In the interest of not reinventing the wheel, I'd like to quote its summaries of the scenes I'm interested in. This is how the movie begins:

Synopsis of Lost in the Dark (2006)

> The content of this page was created directly by users and has not been screened or verified by IMDb staff.
>
> Warning! This synopsis may contain spoilers.
>
> See plot summary for non-spoiler summarized description.
>
> Professor Isabelle Price (Isabelle Router) is being interviewed in her office. Thirty-five years ago, she says, on Halloween night, a woman was brought by train from Hoboken, New Jersey, to a spot north of the upstate New York town of Huguenot. As she speaks, the screen cuts to a shot of a 1960s-era passenger train speeding across farmland, then back to her. The woman's name, she says, was Agatha Merryweather. The screen shows a graduation-style portrait of a young woman with dark eyes and long black hair. The image switches to a large blue-and-white two-story house. In a voice-over, the professor says that for the previous four years, Agatha Merryweather had been confined to the basement of her parents' home in Weehawken, New Jersey. During that time, neighbors reported frequent shouts, screams, and crashes coming from the house. The photograph of the house is replaced by one of police reports fanned out over a desktop. The Weehawken police, the voice-over continues, responded to 108 separate noise complaints; although only at the very end did they actually enter the house. The camera zeroes in on the report on top of the pile. When the Merryweathers opened the front door to their house, Professor Price says, the police saw the living room in shambles, furniture upended, lamps smashed, a bookcase tipped over. They also saw Agatha Merryweather, age twenty-one, crouched in one corner of the living room, wearing a filthy nightdress. The screen

shows a photograph of a middle-aged man and woman, him in a brown suit, her in a green dress. Agatha's parents, the voice-over says, assured the officers that things were not as they appeared. Their daughter was not well, and every now and again, she had fits. The police thought the couple was acting strangely, so they entered the house. One of them approached the girl. The screen shows an open door, its interior dark. The other officer, Professor Price says, was drawn to the door to the basement. As the camera focuses on the darkness within the doorway, she says, he noticed that the door had been bolted and padlocked, but that the bolt and the lock had been torn loose when the door was thrown open, apparently with great force. There were no working lights in the basement, but the officer had his flashlight. He went downstairs and discovered a bare, empty space, with a pile of blankets for a bed and a pair of buckets for a toilet. The walls were covered in writing, row after row of crosses, six-pointed stars, crescent moons, other symbols the cop didn't recognize. The smell was terrible.

The screen returns to Professor Price, sitting at her desk. From behind the camera, the interviewer (Gillian Bernheimer) asks what happened next. The answer to that question, the professor says, is very interesting. While the police were going about their business, Mrs. Merryweather was on the phone. As you can imagine, the officers were certain they had stumbled onto a case of child abuse. Before they had finished questioning Mr. Merryweather, a black car pulled up in front of the house. Out steps Harrison Law, the archbishop of Newark, with a couple of assistants. The film shifts to a clip of a heavyset man wearing a bishop's miter and robes and holding a bishop's crozier, greeting a crowd outside a church. The officers were surprised, the professor says, and even more surprised by what the archbishop said to them: This woman is under the care of the Church. She is suffering from a terrible spiritual affliction, and her parents are working with me to see that she returns to health.

The screen returns to the professor. The interviewer asks how the police reacted. Professor Price says, They were very impressed. This was when the Church still commanded considerable respect.

For an archbishop to intervene personally in a situation was unusual. The cops were willing to give him a lot more leeway than they would in a similar situation today. Although, she adds, to his credit, one of the officers still wrote a fairly extensive report on the incident, which is how we know about it.

The interviewer asks if there was any follow-up. The professor shakes her head. She says, The report was filed and forgotten. However, she was able to track down one of the Merryweathers' former neighbors. This person, who did not want to be identified, said that the morning after the police made their incursion, they watched Agatha Merryweather be led down the front steps of her house by a priest and a nun. She appeared to be wearing a straitjacket. The priest and nun helped her into the backseat of a black car. The black car drove off, and that was the last the neighbor saw of Agatha. Professor Price says she asked the neighbor if they remembered the date of Agatha's departure. As a matter of fact, the neighbor said, they did. It was Halloween.

What were the priest and nun doing there? the interviewer asks. The professor says she can only guess. She's been in touch with the archdiocese of Newark, not to mention Harrison Law, who currently holds a position at the Vatican. Neither was any help. The archdiocese claims to have no record of contact between the former archbishop and the Merryweathers. Harrison Law says that the assistance he offers those under his pastoral care comes with a guarantee of utter discretion.

The interviewer says, It sounds like the Church was a dead end. Which leads me to ask, How did you learn about Agatha Merryweather in the first place? And what led you to connect her to the woman who left the train outside Huguenot?

Professor Price says, Bear with me. She holds up a photocopy of a drawing. It shows the face of a young woman with dark eyes and long black hair, and bears a strong resemblance to the photograph of Agatha Merryweather. She says, This was made by a police sketch artist in Wiltwyck, New York, after several of the passengers who were on that train called the police to express their concern. All of their reports agreed that the woman was

wearing a straitjacket and was accompanied by a priest and a nun. The professor lowers the piece of paper. She says, The passengers also agreed that Agatha and her companions were met by another pair of men, also priests, outside the entrance to the mine formerly run by the Joppenburgh Cement Company. The police might have passed off the reports as not worth more than a call to Saint John's in Joppenburgh to ask if their priests had met someone off the Wiltwyck train. However, one of the reports came from a local judge, who insisted on a more thorough investigation. This, Professor Price says, is how they found the bodies.

Bodies? the interviewer asks. The professor is replaced by a series of black-and-white crime-scene photographs. They show a pair of naked men lying side by side next to the wall of a cave. Their legs are together, their arms are at their sides, and their eyes are shut. Their throats have been torn open, down to the bone. There are long scratches on their faces and their arms. The wall beside them is splashed with blood, as is the floor near them. In voice-over, Professor Price says, These two were found by the officers who were sent to check the site. As you can see, their clothes, any jewelry they might have been wearing, whatever might have identified them, has been removed. The evidence was that they were killed after a brief, fierce struggle. Obviously, the cause of death was the wound to each man's throat. The medical examiner said their throats had been ripped apart by a set of teeth, most likely human, though he noted irregularities in the bite marks upon which he failed to elaborate. After their deaths, the men were stripped and positioned together. Whoever had tended to the corpses had been careful to leave no traces of themselves. As for the assailant: a scattering of bloody hand- and footprints were found near the top of the tunnel wall, nearly twelve feet up. They retreated into the mine for twenty-five feet, and stopped.

The professor returns to the screen. The interviewer asks her what exactly she's saying. Professor Price says she doesn't know. For eight days, the police conducted a substantial investigation. The murders were front-page news in papers up and down the Hudson Valley. They were the lead story on all the local TV news

broadcasts. There was a lot of concern that a homicidal maniac or maniacs was on the loose. One of the local papers speculated that the killings might be the work of a Manson-style cult. Huguenot was quite the counterculture mecca at this time. After a few days, the story moved from the front page to page two or three, but it was still very much news. A couple of the passengers on the train thought the dead men were the priests who had helped Agatha Merryweather off the train, but none of the local clergy admitted to knowing them. The sketch I showed you was published in the paper, shown on TV. This was how Agatha Merryweather was identified as the woman on the train. A couple of her former neighbors saw the sketch and called the local police to say they recognized her. The police went to the Merryweathers' house, but it was empty, the couple nowhere to be found. None of the neighbors had seen them leave. Apparently, the police did some kind of follow-up with the Church, but they don't appear to have had any more success than I did.

The professor says, In Huguenot, the police searched for Agatha in surrounding homes and buildings and turned up nothing. They brought in dogs in hopes they might discover something. Two of the dogs pissed themselves, then started fighting with such ferocity, their handlers needed help separating them. A third dog went into the mine a hundred yards, sat, and started to howl. The police had dismissed the bloody hand- and footprints on the wall as some kind of red herring; although they hadn't been able to explain why the false lead had been placed in such an outlandish place. Now they decided to search the mine. They broke out the flashlights and set off into its tunnels in pairs.

The interviewer asks if they found anything. Professor Price says, They did. In one of the mine's side passages, the police came across what was left of a straitjacket. It was stiff with dried blood and had been ripped open by its wearer. More officers were brought in to assist in the effort. Several reported hearing sounds ahead of or behind them, footsteps, mostly, though one pair of officers described something growling close to them. The police said they were concentrating their efforts on the mine, which was

> where they were reasonably certain their suspect was hiding. And then…nothing. The search was called off.
>
> Called off? the interviewer asks. The professor nods. Why? the interviewer asks. The professor says, No one knows. The mine remained the best lead. There was no trace of Agatha Merryweather anywhere else. When they heard about it, the local papers tried to get to the bottom of what had happened, but the police stonewalled them. It didn't take the papers long to move on to other stories. Since that time, no more has been done to determine Agatha Merryweather's fate.

Really? the interviewer asks. The professor says, I've made a pretty thorough search. There are stories the local kids tell, legends, but nothing in the way of formal investigation. Oh, Professor Price says, but I did learn one more odd fact in the course of my research. The bodies of the murdered men that were left at the mine's entrance? Three days after they arrived at the county morgue, they were claimed, by a John Smith, of Manhattan. The interviewer says, An alias? Professor Price nods. She says, I haven't talked to every John Smith who was living in the city at that time, but I'm pretty confident whoever came for those corpses did so under a fairly blatant pseudonym. Why? the interviewer asks. The professor says, That question comes up a great deal, doesn't it? If we're going to answer it, then I think we need to start with the place where Agatha Merryweather was last seen. We have to go to the mine.

The second scene occurs two-thirds of the way through the movie. By this point, we're well into the mine. In addition to Isabelle Price, we've met Carmen Meloy, the director; Kristi Fairbairn, the cameraperson; George Slatsky, the sound person; and Ben Rios and Megan Hwang, the interns. We've passed the entrance, with its remnants of parties past, its scattered garbage, beer cans, and bottles, random articles of clothing, and graffiti, including the warning about "Bad Agatha," a name everyone in the film crew, with the exception of Isabelle, picks up. Following the old map of the mine Isabelle has folded into her knapsack, we've descended the main tunnels, running across strange, rusted pieces of machinery, shovels and other tools, a dusty copy of *Playboy* that's been a source of temporary amusement. Along the way, we've had snippets of Isabelle recounting the

story of Agatha Merryweather, as well as moments of the crew reacting to the tale. We've encountered the portrait of Agatha's face, split between a normal right and a cadaverous left half; we've flinched when Ben touches it and jumped in our seats when he starts screaming, only to laugh with nervous relief as his outburst dissolves into laughter, and Megan calls him an asshat.

We've worked out some of the relationships among the crew, as well. Ben and Megan are involved; she's worried about how her parents will react to her dating someone who isn't Korean. We catch the tail end of a couple of heated, whispered exchanges between them. George is short-tempered, preoccupied with his ten-year-old daughter, for full custody of whom he's locked in legal combat with his ex-wife. Kristi is unhappy from the start with this project, a sentiment exacerbated by a mild case of claustrophobia. Carmen spends much of her time checking in with the others, consulting on technical matters, touching base on personal ones. Isabelle is focused on searching the mine with an intensity that's unnerving; she gives the strong impression of being in possession of additional information she has not shared with her companions.

(A pause here to say that Isabelle Router deserves credit for a remarkable job of acting. Granted, her part is based to a large extent on her actual background; she nonetheless delivers an exceptional portrait of a woman struggling to maintain her composure in the face of pressures external and internal.)

On the soundtrack, sounds that started as background noise, barely distinguishable from the clamor of the crew proceeding, have increased in volume substantially. Some are identifiable: a low, weak sobbing, the kind that comes at the end of hours' crying; the rattle and click of a small rock being knocked across the floor into another rock. Some are harder to place: a metallic ping and a sudden, deafening roar that sends the film crew into wide-eyed panic, racing headlong through the tunnels as the sound goes on and on.

This is what brings them to a low opening on their left, into a small cave where they spend a solid minute shouting, cursing, and screaming, until the noise drains away and we're left with their mingled panting. Only now do they notice the chamber they've entered. Overhead, the ceiling slopes down

into darkness. To either side, walls that are marked with rows of unfamiliar symbols stretch to join it. Directly in front of the crew, a narrow trench bisects the floor, running away into blackness. The bottom of the trench is streaked with blackish-red liquid. Despite the warnings of the others, Ben Rios kneels and extends a hand to the substance. When he raises his fingertips to his nostrils, he pulls his head back, lips wrinkling in disgust. “Blood,” he says, as we knew he would.

While the others digest this news, Isabelle Price is on the move, sweeping her flashlight over the weird figures on the walls. Geometric shapes—mostly circles within circles—punctuate long lines of characters that appear almost hieroglyphic. She directs her light to the floor and picks out something scratched on the rock, a rectangle the size of a dinner tray. YES is incised in its upper left-hand corner, NO in its upper right-hand corner. The letters of the alphabet line the inside of the rectangle, beginning with A below the YES and Z under the NO. A series of lines, some more recent than others, loop from letter to letter to the flat stone positioned at the rectangle’s center. The lines seem to have been drawn in blood. Isabelle lifts the flat stone and turns it over, revealing its underside smeared with shades of red. Rock in hand, she crosses to the trench, where she kneels to dip the rock in the blood there. As the crew members exclaim and ask her what she’s doing, Isabelle returns to the primitive Ouija board and replaces the stone within it. She beckons Ben and Megan to join her, but Ben refuses. After a brief debate, George says he’ll take part in the professor’s little séance. Passing his equipment to Ben, he lowers to his knees to Isabelle’s right; Megan is on the left. There’s a whispered exchange off camera, Kristi asking Carmen what the fuck is going on, Carmen telling her to keep shooting.

Here’s how the IMDb entry describes what happens next:

> Professor Price says, Rest your fingers on the stone lightly, like this. She places the tips of her fingers on the stone. Megan and George do the same. The professor says, Good. Now clear your minds.
>
> Megan asks, How are we supposed to do that? Have you seen where we are?

Just do the best you can, Professor Price says. You can close your eyes, if it helps.

Megan shakes her head no, but George shuts his eyes. He says, All right, what next?

The professor closes her eyes. She asks, Is anyone there?

Nothing happens.

Professor Price says, Is anyone there?

Slowly, the stone scrapes across the floor. Megan screams, but keeps her fingers on it. George says, What the hell? The professor says, Easy. Stay calm. Keep your hands on the planchette.

Megan says, The what?

George says, The stone.

Right, Professor Price says, the stone. Her eyes are open. The stone settles on YES. The professor nods. She asks, Who is there?

The stone slides from YES to the letter A beneath it. Then to G, back to A, to T, to H, and back to A. Professor Price says, Agatha.

Kristi's voice says, Holy shit. Ben Rios crosses himself.

The professor asks, What happened to you, Agatha?

The stone spells out T-R-A-P-P-E-D.

Professor Price says, Trapped? You were trapped here, in the mine?

The stone moves to YES.

The professor asks, Why?

The stone spells B-A-D.

Professor Price says, You were bad.

The stone spells B-A-D.

The professor frowns. She asks, How were you bad?

The stone does not move.

Professor Price says, How were you bad, Agatha?

The stone spells out B-L-O-O-D.

The professor says, I don’t understand. How were you bad, Agatha?

George says, Seems pretty obvious to me. She was doing something with blood. Ben says, Maybe she was drinking it.

The stone slides to YES.

Professor Price says, Please, let me do the talking. What were you doing with blood, Agatha?

The stone moves to NO.

The professor says, All right. Who trapped you here, in the mine?

The stone spells K-L-E-R-O-S.

Megan asks, Who is Kleros? George shakes his head. Professor Price says nothing. Ben says, I think it’s Greek. Carmen asks, Greek? Ben says, Yeah. It’s like the root of clergy.

The professor asks, Where are you from, Agatha?

The stone moves to NO.

Professor Price repeats the question.

The stone does not move.

The professor exhales. She asks, Can we help you, Agatha?

The stone does not move.

Professor Price waits for an answer. None comes. She asks, Are you still there, Agatha?

The stone does not move.

Megan asks, What happened? George says, We lost her. He sits back, lifting his hands from the stone. Megan does the same. The professor maintains contact for a few seconds more, then she sits back, too.

Kristi says, What the fuck was that? Carmen says, Yeah, Isabelle, what’s going on?

Isabelle Price starts to speak, but her answer is interrupted by George shouting, Shit! and scrambling backward. Megan screams and stumbles to her feet. The professor raises her hands, startled.

> The planchette stone is bleeding. All over its surface drops of blood appear, swell, and collapse into streams that trickle to the edges of the stone and spill onto the floor. Kristi shouts, Fuck! Megan turns and collides with Ben. Blood pools around the planchette stone. Professor Price stares at it. Carmen says, Isabelle, what the fuck is happening? Blood spreads over the words and letters of the Ouija board. Ben mumbles something. George is praying, Our Father, Who art in Heaven. Blood flows to the edges of the trench in the center of the cave and slides into it. Kristi says, What is this? What is this? What are we seeing? What? Carmen tells everyone to move away from the blood, to come over beside her. The crew does, except for the professor. Carmen says, Isabelle. Come here, Isabelle.

Professor Price turns around. Her face is blank. Her left eye is red, blood pouring from it down her cheek.

The third and final scene is, of course, the movie's climax. By now, the movie's title has been realized, as the film crew has emerged from the cave to discover that their panicked flight has carried them off Isabelle's map. Despite following several seemingly familiar paths, they have remained lost. Their complaints have grown more hysterical.

In the meantime, Carmen has succeeded in coaxing Isabelle out of the trancelike state into which she fell. The sclera of her left eye is still stained red with hemorrhages, but it's no longer actively bleeding. Prompted by Carmen and Kristi, she has revealed some of the secrets we've suspected her of harboring. Her research on Agatha Merryweather, she says, led her to a website that's kind of a clearinghouse of weird information. There was an entry for the Bound Woman of the Mine that sounded as if it might connect to the information she'd already gathered. The site kept crashing her computer, so she wasn't able to read all of the listing, but the portion she finished was intriguing. It concerned a fourteen-year-old girl who had been responsible for a series of terrible murders in northwestern New Jersey during the early nineteen sixties. This was farm country, near the Pennsylvania line. For some reason, after her apprehension by the sheriff, the local Catholic priest was brought in to consult on the case. This led to another pair of priests being summoned, an older man and a younger one,

whose accents no one recognized. They said they were members of a small order, the Perilaimio. Eventually, the girl was released into their custody on the condition she remain confined to her house. At some point thereafter, she, her parents, and the priests were discovered to have fled for an unknown destination. There was talk of a search for her, but it came to nothing.

When Kristi asks what any of this has to do with anything, Isabelle reveals that the website gave a name for the girl: Agatha Merryweather. Obviously, with the assistance of the Church, she and her family fled east, where they were resettled in Weehawken. The question was, why?

This Agatha was possessed, George says. That's where the story is heading, isn't it?

That is what she thought, Isabelle says, until she looked into the order to which the priests belonged, the Perilaimio. It's an old, old group, maybe older than the Church itself.

What is she talking about? Megan wants to know. How can there be a part of the Church that came before it?

Like Christmas trees, Ben says, or Yule logs. Pagan things the Church folded into it.

That's it exactly, Isabelle says. The Perilaimio were charged with managing the *Keres.*

Which means what? Kristi asks.

Death-spirits, Ben says.

Death-spirits? Megan says. How does he know this stuff?

He took Greek in high school, Ben says.

Does he mean ghosts? Megan says.

Sounds more like devils, George says.

No, Isabelle says. These are beings of the primordial dark, beyond the Church's sway. They depend on blood to maintain their presence in this world. They can't be cast out, or destroyed, only contained.

Which is what happened here, George says. Agatha Merryweather was brought to this place to imprison her.

That’s the theory, Isabelle says. At first, she read this entire story as a case of a mentally ill girl subjected to a prolonged victimization by religious maniacs. The mine, she assumed, was intended as a jail, primitive but low profile. Most likely, the men who transported her to upstate New York planned for her to die in these tunnels, of malnutrition or disease.

Why would they have thought this? Kristi says. Didn’t Isabelle just say the death-spirits couldn’t be killed?

It’s complicated, Isabelle says. The *Keres* are fundamentally violent; they can’t be killed by violent means. However, if their host dies of natural causes, they lose their hold on it.

This makes no sense, Kristi says. How does any of this make sense?

The point is, Carmen says, Isabelle thought they were dealing with a crazy person.

Honestly, Isabelle says, she was sure Agatha had been dead for years. The most she expected was to find her remains.

Instead, Kristi says, they have…this. What they have.

“Us,” George says, “lost. In the dark. With a monster.”

Their wandering has brought the crew to another unfamiliar location, a small chamber whose rough walls recede at regular intervals to what appear to be doorways.

This is the IMDb summary of what ensues:

> Ben shines his flashlight on the recess farthest to the right. It shows solid rock. He swings the light to the left. The next recess opens on a passageway. He swings the light to the left, to the recess directly across from him. It is solid, too, but there is something on the rock at approximately head level. It is the same portrait the film crew saw at the beginning of the expedition, a woman’s face, the left half a skull. Megan shrieks. Kristi says, What the fuck? Ben says, It’s only another drawing, and crosses to it. He reaches out his free hand to touch it. He says, See?
>
> His flashlight goes out. Megan shrieks again. Carmen says, Ben? George says, Now is not the time for screwing around, kid. He aims his flashlight at the recess.

There is a flurry of motion. Ben screams. George's flashlight beam swings from side to side, trying to keep up with the action. Kristi shouts. Carmen points her flashlight in Ben's direction. She says, There! There! Ben continues screaming. There is someone grabbing him from behind. White arms wrap around his neck and chest. White legs encircle his waist. A head with long black hair presses against his neck. Ben grabs at the arms. He slaps at the head. He stumbles back into the wall. Megan screams, Someone do something! Professor Price shouts, Agatha! Agatha, stop!

Agatha growls and tugs her head back. There is the sound of flesh tearing, followed by a hiss as blood sprays from Ben's open throat. He drops to his knees, slaps at Agatha's hands, and falls forward, Agatha still clinging to him. She drops her head to his neck. There is the sound of her slurping his blood. Kristi says, Holy shit. Megan screams, You fucking bitch! and runs at Agatha, raising her flashlight as a club. Agatha ducks her swing and leaps onto her. She knocks Megan onto her back, and rips her throat out. Kristi says, Jesus Christ.

George says, We have to get out of here. He runs from the chamber. Agatha jumps off Megan onto the wall. She hangs on it like a spider. Professor Price shouts, Agatha! Please! Agatha! Agatha scrambles up the wall and out of the light. Carmen sweeps her flashlight around the ceiling. Kristi shouts, Where did she go? Where is she? The professor shouts, Agatha! Please!

Agatha drops onto Carmen. Her flashlight spins away. She screams. Agatha growls. Kristi and Professor Price scramble out of the way. There is the sound of Carmen struggling. Kristi shouts, Come on! Let's go! Now! Carmen shouts, Wait! Help me! Kristi says, I'm sorry, and runs through the passageway Ben discovered. Carmen shouts, Kristi! Agatha snarls. The professor says, Agatha, please, then follows Kristi. Carmen screams.

The screen goes black.

After five seconds, there is a clatter, and the screen fills with Kristi's face, illuminated by the camera light. She says, I don't know why I'm doing this. There's no way either of us is getting out of here. I can hear her—Agatha. She's coming closer. Kristi

begins to cry. She says, I just wanted to say, I'm sorry about Carmen. I couldn't do anything about Ben and Megan. Maybe I couldn't have helped Carmen, either, but I'm sorry. She wipes her eyes with the back of her hand. She says, And George, if you make it out of this place, and somehow see this, fuck you, you chickenshit piece of shit.

The camera turns to show Isabelle Price's face. Kristi says, You never told us everything, did you? Professor Price shakes her head. Kristi asks, Anything you want to say now? Isabelle shakes her head. Kristi says, You know this is all your fault. The professor nods. Kristi says, We're going to leave this camera here, in hopes that someone will find it. Which is about as stupid as all the rest of this, but hey, why stop now? She sets the camera down, turned to light the tunnel she and Professor Price are headed down. She says, We still have a flashlight. We'll hold off using it as long as we can, to save the batteries. Professor Price starts along the tunnel. Kristi follows. When she is almost out of view, Kristi stops and turns. She says, I can hear her. Hurry.

The women disappear into the darkness. For the next three minutes, the credits roll over the scene. Once the credits are finished, the camera light dims. There is the sound of bare feet slapping stone. Agatha's face fills the screen. Her features are those of a young woman, covered in blood. Her eyes are wide. Blood plasters her hair to her forehead and cheeks. The screen flickers. Agatha's left eye is an empty socket, her left cheek sunken, her lips on this side drawn back from jagged teeth. The screen flickers again, goes to static, then goes dark.

3

It's the teacher in me: I can't help wanting to discuss all the things *Lost in the Dark* does right. The opening, for example, which imparts a substantial amount of background information to the viewer without sacrificing interest, as well as the Agatha Merryweather narrative, itself, which taps into the enduring fascination with the Catholic Church and its secrets (which, if I felt like being truly pedantic, I would point out is one of the ribs of the larger umbrella of the Gothic under which the movie shelters). Or the

way the film suggests there's even more to the Agatha narrative than we've been told, than anyone's been told. Only Isabelle Price knows the full story, and to the end, she keeps back some portion of it. By making her the model for the portraits of Agatha the crew encounter, a similarity no one mentions, the movie visually suggests a connection between the women, which contributes to the audience's growing sense that the characters are in a situation that's much worse than they understand. (It's one of the enduring conceits of the film that the identity of the actress who portrays Bad Agatha has never been revealed. The credits assign the part to Agatha Merryweather. I'm of the camp that would wager money Isabelle Router played the monster; it fits too well with the portrait ploy not to be the case.)

Were it not for Sarah Fiore's interview in the Blu-ray extras, this article might address itself to exactly such a critical analysis. That interview, though, changed everything. According to Sarah, the trip into the mine to shoot footage for Isabelle Router's documentary lasted much longer than they had planned, almost twenty hours. During that time, the crew became lost, wandering out of the mine into a series of natural tunnels and caves. While underground, they had a number of strange experiences, about half of which at least one member of the crew caught on film. They returned to the surface with a couple of hours of decent footage that was not what they had been planning on. After a rough edit, Sarah sat down with Larry Fessenden to watch the film. He loved it. He also thought she had abandoned her plan for a documentary in favor of an outright horror movie. Thinking quickly, Sarah responded to his enthusiasm by saying that yes, she had decided to go a different route. Fessenden offered to produce a feature-length version of what he'd seen, on the condition that Sarah revise the script to give it a more substantial narrative. Since there was no actual script at that moment, his request was both easier and harder to fulfill; nonetheless, she agreed to it. She also agreed that she should keep as much of what she'd shown him as they could in the longer film. This turned out to be about forty minutes of an hour-and-forty-minute movie. Isabelle Router was willing essentially to play herself, as were Kristi Nightingale and George Maltmore. The interns, Priya and Chad, had no interest in taking part in another expedition to the mine, so they were replaced by a pair of actors, Ben Formosa and Megan

Park. Rather than juggle the roles of director, scriptwriter, and actor, Sarah hired Carmen Fuentes to play her. The rest is cinema history.

If we're to believe Sarah, *Lost in the Dark* was built from another film, a piece of fiction constructed using a significant portion of nonfiction. I use the "if" because as soon as word of her interview got out, the question of its authenticity was raised. After all, this was a filmmaker who had started her career with a faux documentary. What better way to mark the ten-year anniversary of that production than with another instance of the form, one designed to send audiences back to pore over the original movie? By those who took this view of Sarah's revelations, she was variously praised for her cleverness and decried for her cynicism. I've swung back and forth on the matter. I did my due diligence. The narrative Sarah relates, of the mysterious woman who stepped down from the train to Wiltwyck, the murdered men at the entrance to the mine, is true. You can read about it online, in the archives of the *Wiltwyck Daily Freeman* and the *Poughkeepsie Journal.* Confirming Isabelle Router's uncle's story proved more difficult. Richard Higgins died in Tampa three years ago. I located one of his former colleagues, Henry Ellison, who confirmed that Rich had gone into the mine to retrieve that dumbass high school kid. Of any more than that, Rich never spoke to him.

Still, there's sufficient evidence that Sarah Fiore was telling at least some of the truth. This doesn't mean there was a documentary shot between her discovery of this information and *Lost in the Dark.* Once again, I did some digging and came up with contact information for all but one of the members of the (supposed) original crew. Wherever Chad Singer currently resides, it's beyond my rudimentary sleuthing abilities to locate. Of the remainder of those involved, Priya Subramani listened to my introduction, then hung up and blocked my number. Kristi Nightingale told me to go fuck myself; I'm not sure if she also blocked me, since there didn't seem much point in calling back. George Maltmore instantly was angry, demanding to know who the hell I thought I was and what the hell I thought I was playing at. Despite my best efforts to reassure him, he became increasingly incensed, threatening to find out where I lived and show up at my front door with his shotgun. Finally, I hung up on him. Somewhat to my surprise, Larry Fessenden spoke to me for almost half an hour; although he did so

without answering my question in a definitive way. Sure, he said, he remembered the film that Sarah had brought to him. It was a terrific piece of work. Was what he saw a documentary? I asked. Ah, he said, yeah, that was the story making the rounds, wasn't it? He couldn't remember Sarah saying that to him at the time, but it would be something if it turned out to be true, wouldn't it?

Yes, I said, it would.

Even more unexpectedly, Isabelle Router agreed to talk. Once *Lost in the Dark* was done shooting, she and Sarah had an argument, which resulted in a falling-out that has lasted to this day. Isabelle returned to Albany, to work on her PhD at the state university, only to leave after a single semester. For the next few years, she said, she was kind of messed up. She moved around a lot, did…things. Eventually, she pulled herself together, settled in Boulder, where she became a yoga instructor. She asked me if I had spoken with anyone else, and what they had said. Isabelle was particularly interested to know if I'd talked to Sarah. That I had been her teacher was of great interest; she wanted to know what Sarah had been like as a student. When it came to the question of the documentary, her answers grew vague. Yes, they had done some preliminary filming in the mine. In fact, they'd gotten kind of lost down there. Did I know that the idea for the movie, for all of the supernatural stuff, was hers? It came out of the research she'd been doing for her dissertation. You did shoot a documentary first, I said.

"I don't know that I'd go that far," Isabelle said. "We were just lost in the dark. Sarah got that much right."

Nor could I coax any more definitive statement from her. There was enough in Isabelle's words for me to take them as supporting Sarah's claims but not enough to settle the matter. Not to mention, the more I paged through the notes I'd taken from all of the interviews, the less certain I was that I wasn't being played for a sucker. The extremity of Priya's, Kristi's, and George's reactions—their theatricality—added to Fessenden's bland non-answers, and Isabelle's ambiguous replies seemed intended, *scripted,* to give the impression that not only had the documentary been filmed, it had recorded an experience singularly unpleasant. On the other hand, quite often, the truth looks glaringly untrue; as Tolstoy said, God is a lousy novelist.

In the end, I would need to speak with my former student. Rather than a phone conversation or email exchange, Sarah suggested we meet in person. Halloween, she was scheduled to attend a special late-night screening of *Lost in the Dark* at the Joppenburgh Community Theater. Why didn't we get together before that? She'd bring her laptop; there were clips she could show me that would prove interesting. I agreed, which has brought me here, seated at the back of Pete's Corner Pub, while trick-or-treaters make their annual pilgrimage.

4

Sarah Fiore enters the bar as she used to enter my classroom—walking briskly, head down, oversize bag clutched to her side. The heels of her boots knock on the wood floor. She's wearing a hip-length black leather coat over a white blouse and black jeans. With her head tilted forward, her long black hair curtains her face. Before the hostess on duty can approach her, she's crossed to where I'm sitting and slid into the bench across from me. Since I didn't meet her until she was in her mid-twenties, I don't see as dramatic a change in her as I often do with my former students. That said, time has passed, which I've no doubt she notices in the tide of white hairs that has swept both sides of my beard and is washing through what brown remains on my chin. We exchange greetings, Sarah orders a martini from the waitress who's hurried to the booth, and she slides a gray laptop from her bag. She places it on the table in front of her, unopened. Hands flat on either side of it, she asks me if I've talked to the other members of the original crew.

With the exception of Chad Singer, I say, I have, and relay to her abbreviated versions of our conversations. She smirks at Kristi Nightingale's cursing, drops her head in an attempt to conceal a laugh at George Maltmore's furious show. Larry Fessenden's noncommittal response receives a nod, as does Isabelle Router's remark about them being lost in the dark. "She was intrigued to learn that I had been your teacher," I add, but it draws no further response from Sarah.

The server returns with Sarah's drink, asks me if I'd like more coffee. I decline. "If you need anything," she says, and leaves.

“All right,” Sarah says after tasting her drink. “How should we do this?”

“Why don’t we start with a question: Why now? Why wait ten years to reveal this new information? Wouldn’t it have been simpler to do so back when the movie was first released?”

“Possibly,” Sarah says. “I don’t know. At the time, Isabelle and I weren’t on speaking terms. We still aren’t, but then, it was new. We’d had this massive fight—things didn’t just turn ugly, they turned hideous. Everything felt pretty raw. Part of me did want to go public with the documentary stuff, but it was mostly because I thought it would hurt Isabelle. She was back at graduate school, trying to pull together a dissertation. If word got out that she’d been part of this crazy documentary project, I figured it would make her study less pleasant.

“For once in my life, though, I listened to my inner Jiminy Cricket and did the right thing. For a long time after that, I was so busy, I didn’t have time to think about the footage. Really, when I sat down for the interview with *Rue Morgue*, I had no intention of mentioning any of that stuff. It just… came out. I don’t see the harm in it, now. I mean, Isabelle left her doctoral program, didn’t she? Isn’t she a massage therapist or something?”

“Yoga instructor,” I say. “But you have to admit—”

“The timing is highly suspicious, yes. I can’t blame anyone who thinks that. It’s what I would say.”

“You, however, have the original documentary.”

Sarah nods. “I do.” She raises the laptop’s screen. “The problem is, we’re living in an age where it’s easy to fake stuff like this. If you have the resources, you can put together something that would fool everyone up to and maybe including the experts. Although, why would you want to?” She lifts a hand to forestall my answer. “Yeah, publicity, I know. It’s a case of diminishing returns. If all I was after was to generate interest in the movie, I would have ended my story saying that the original footage was lost, wiped when my computer crashed. It wouldn’t be worth whatever meager spike in sales you might project for me to go to the trouble of creating a new fake film.”

“Which is exactly the sort of thing I’d expect you to say, if you were trying to pass off a fake movie as authentic.”

“Yeah,” she says, sweeping her fingers over the computer’s touch pad to bring it to life. “The thing is, if you want to believe something’s a conspiracy, you will. No matter what I say, one way or the other, it’ll be evidence of what you’re looking for.”

“Fair enough.”

“Okay.” She taps keys and turns the computer ninety degrees, allowing me a view of the screen. The window open shows a woman’s head and shoulders foreground right, the entrance to the mine background left. It’s Isabelle Router, her face burnished by the same late-afternoon sunlight that paints the rock face behind her bronze. “This is how we began,” Sarah says. “Isabelle standing in front of the mine, reciting the history of the mystery woman. We could watch it, but you already know the story, right?”

“Right.”

“Let’s…” She fast-forwards ten minutes. We’re inside the mine, rough rock walls and ceiling, scattered trash on the floor. To anyone who’s seen *Lost in the Dark*, it’s a familiar shot, although the voices are different. Somewhere off screen to the right, Chad Singer is saying, “Am I going to have to carry this for very long? Because it is *heavy.*” From what sounds as if it might be behind the camera, George Maltmore is muttering about the acoustics of this damn place. Much closer, Kristi Nightingale says, “Eww,” at the desiccated carcass of a small animal, likely a mouse. “We had to swap out the soundtrack for something more atmospheric,” Sarah says to me. “Plus, Chad had left, so we couldn’t use his voice.” She pauses the video. “There’s plenty more of this kind of thing I can show you, if that’s what you want.” She advances five minutes, to the crew encountering a piece of Jack Kirby-esque machinery the approximate dimensions of a refrigerator, its yellow paint faded and flaked away in patches, the large round openings in its sides strung with cobwebs. A leap of another six minutes brings us to the comic relief of the ancient *Playboy*, its cover and interior pages crumpled. The crew’s jokes approximate those in the later film. Ten minutes more down the dark tunnel brings the first surprise of the interview, the portrait of a woman’s face on the rock wall. It’s exactly as it appears in *Lost in the Dark.* Despite myself, I flinch, say, “Jesus. This is for real?”

“It’s what we found,” Sarah says.

I stare at the waves of the woman's hair, the lines of her cheekbones and nose, the weird smearing on the right-hand side of the drawing, which gives the left half of the face a roughly skeletal appearance. I fight the urge to reach my fingers to the screen. "I assumed—I mean, I know Isabelle's uncle mentioned it in his story, but I figured he invented it."

"Me too," Sarah says. "It seemed hard to believe, didn't it? Like something out of a horror movie."

"Who did it?" I can't stop looking at the portrait, which is in some ways no different from what I've seen previously, and in other ways has been fundamentally changed. Stranger still, the portrait's resemblance to Isabelle remains as strong as ever. "I mean, did Isabelle have any friends who were artists?"

"She swore it wasn't her," Sarah says. She lets the movie play. The camera pans from the tunnel wall to Isabelle, who is not pleased. "Very funny," she says.

"What do you mean?" Kristi says.

"You think I don't know who this is?"

"Isabelle," Sarah says, "we didn't do this."

"Yeah, right," Isabelle says.

"Seriously," Kristi says.

"You think we had something to do with this?" Priya Subramani says.

"Obviously," Isabelle says. "How else do you explain it?"

"Um, someone drew it," Chad says. "Someone who isn't one of us."

"Are you sure?" Isabelle says.

"Yeah," Chad says. "When my friends say they didn't do something, I believe them."

"What would be the point?" Sarah says. "Why would we do this, and then lie to you about it?"

Doubt softens Isabelle's features, but already, she's invested too much in the argument to yield the point. Plus, she doesn't want to contemplate the implications of the crew telling the truth. She says, "Whatever," and turns away.

The camera swings to Sarah, who blows out through pursed lips while rolling her eyes.

"Probably should have omitted that last bit," she says, tapping the touch pad and freezing the screen. "After we returned from the mine and were going through the footage, Kristi suggested that maybe Isabelle was responsible for the drawing. I told her there was no way, she was being ridiculous. Had she not seen Isabelle's reaction to the thing? When the group of us met to screen what Kristi and I had put together, she asked Isabelle about the portrait point-blank. I didn't stop her. I'll admit: I was curious. Isabelle acted genuinely surprised at the accusation, enough for me to believe her. Although, when I think about her performance in *Lost in the Dark*, how well she acted, I wonder."

"Why would she have done that?"

"To back up the story that had brought us there in the first place," Sarah says.

"I don't know," I say. "That seems like a little far to go."

"Well." Sarah brings the movie ahead another ten minutes, hurrying the crew through a pair of large spaces whose flat ceilings rest on rock columns the girth of large trees. In the second chamber, their flashlights pick out a shape to the right, a dark mound like a heap of rugs. Flashlights trained on the thing, they cross the space toward it. As they approach, the mound gains definition, resolving into the carcass of a large animal. When they reach it, Sarah returns the film to normal speed.

"—is it?" Chad is saying.

"I think it's a bear," Sarah says.

"No way," Kristi says.

"There are bears here?" Priya says.

"Yes," George says, "black bears." He steps away from the group to circle the remains.

"Be careful," Priya says.

"Yeah, George," Chad says, "watch yourself."

“Relax,” George says. “This fellow’s been dead a long time.” He crouches next to the bear’s blunt head, playing his light back and forth over it. His eyes narrow. “What the hell?”

“What?” Sarah says.

“What is it?” Priya says.

“From the looks of things,” George says, “something tore out Gentle Ben here’s throat.”

“Is that strange?” Chad says.

“What could do that?” Kristi says.

“I have no idea,” George says. “Another bear, maybe. A mountain lion, I guess.”

“Hang on—I want to see this,” Kristi says. The camera moves around the animal’s prostrate form to where George sits on his heels, his flashlight directed at the bear’s head. Its eyes are sunken, shriveled, its teeth bared in a final snarl. The right canine is missing, the socket ragged, black with blood long crusted. What should be the animal’s thick neck is a mess of skin torn into leathery ribbon and flaps, laying bare dried muscle and dull bone. “Jesus,” Kristi says.

“Should be more blood,” George says. He sweeps his flashlight over the floor around them, whose dust and rock are unstained. “Huh.”

“What does that mean?” Priya says.

“Could it be, I don’t know, poachers?” Chad says.

“Black bear isn’t protected like that,” George says. “You’re supposed to have a license, but if you shot one by mistake, you wouldn’t need to go to this amount of trouble to hide it. Not to mention, I don’t know what gun would inflict this type of wound.”

“Maybe it was shot,” Chad says, “came in here to escape, and another bear got it.”

George shrugs. “Anything’s possible. Doesn’t explain the lack of blood, though.”

“I do not like this,” Kristi says.

“Hey,” Priya says, “where’s Isabelle?”

Sarah pauses the movie.

“What happened to Isabelle?” I say.

“She…wandered off,” Sarah says.

“In a mine?”

“Yeah,” Sarah says, “that was what the rest of us thought.”

“Where did she go?”

“All the way to the end of the mine, and then farther. There’s a network of caves the mine connects to. We spent most of the shoot searching for her—about fifteen hours.” The next twenty minutes of the film advance in a succession of scenes, each of which leaps ahead another half hour to hour and a half. The expression on the crew’s faces oscillate between irritation and worry, with intermittent stops at fatigue and unease. Sarah says, “We hadn’t brought much in the way of food or drink; we hadn’t expected to be down there for more than a couple of hours. We ran out of both pretty quickly. Not long after, Chad floated the idea of turning around, heading for the surface, where we could call for help, bring in some professionals to find Isabelle. Kristi was aghast at the thought of abandoning her here. The others agreed. We kept on moving farther underground. Isabelle had left enough of a trail for us to follow; although there were a couple of times we really had to search for it. Finally, we arrived at this spot.”

She taps the touch pad. The screen shows the tunnel dead-ending in a shallow chamber filled with junk: rows of rusted barrels, any identifying marks long flaked off; cardboard boxes in various stages of mildewed collapse; shovels and pickaxes, mummified in dusty cobwebs; a stack of eight or nine safety helmets leaning to one side.

“Shit,” Sarah says.

“What do we do now?” Chad says.

“Go back,” George says, “see if we can pick up the trail again at that last fork.”

“Hang on,” Kristi says. The view moves behind the row of barrels closest to the wall. As the camera’s light shifts, so do the barrels’ shadows, swinging away from the rock to reveal a short opening in it. “Guys,” Kristi

says, bringing the camera level with her discovery. Manhole-sized and -shaped, the aperture admits to a brief passage, which ends in darkness.

“What is it?” Sarah says.

“Some kind of tunnel,” Kristi says. The opening swims closer.

“What are you doing?” Sarah says.

“Wait,” Kristi says. The screen rocks wildly as she crawls through the passage.

“Hey!” George calls.

Kristi emerges into a larger space. Curved walls expand to a wider exit. The camera scans the floor, which is strewn with an assortment of stones. A rough path pushes through them. “Guys!” Kristi shouts.

The film jumps to Priya scrambling out of the tunnel. Chad helps her to her feet. To the left, George says, “Is everyone sure about this?”

“No,” Chad says.

“I don’t know,” Priya says.

“Do you want to abandon Isabelle down here,” Kristi says, “in the dark?”

“It’s worth checking out,” Sarah says. “We’ll go a little way. If we don’t see any sign of her, we’ll turn around.”

“What the fuck is she doing here?” Priya says.

“When we find Isabelle,” Sarah says, “we’ll ask her.”

Another cut, and the crew is standing in blackness that extends beyond the limits of their flashlights. Ceiling, walls are out of view; only the rock on which they’re standing is visible. Chad and Kristi shout, “Hello!” and, “Isabelle!” but any echo is at best faint. “Where are we?” Priya says. No one answers.

In the following scene, an object shines in the distance, on the very right edge of the screen. “Hey,” Kristi says, turning the camera to center the thing, “look.” The rest of the crew’s lights converge on it.

“What…?” Priya says.

“It looks like a tooth,” Sarah says.

“It’s a stalagmite,” George says. “Or stalactite. I get the two confused. Either way, it isn’t a tooth.”

“It’s not a stalagmite,” Chad says. “The surface texture’s wrong. Besides, you usually find stalagmites and stalactites in pairs, groups, even. Where are the others?”

“So what is it, Mr. Geologist?” George says.

“It’s a rock,” Kristi says.

It is, though both Sarah’s and George’s identifications are understandable. Composed of some type of white, pearlescent mineral, it stands upright, three and a half, four feet tall, tapering from a narrow base to a flattened top the width of a tea saucer. Halfway down it, there’s a decoration, which, when the camera zooms in on it, resolves into a picture. Executed in what might be charcoal, it’s a face, the features rendered simply, crudely. In the scribble of black hair, the black hole of the left eye, it isn’t hard to recognize the repetition of the portrait near the mine’s entrance. “What the fuck?” Kristi says.

“What is this?” Priya says. “What is happening here?”

“Um,” Chad says. The view draws back from the face to show Chad standing beside the stone, in the process of picking up something from its flattened top. Frowning, he raises a thin, shriveled item to view. “I think this is a finger.”

“Jesus Christ,” Kristi says. “Are you sure?”

“No,” he says, replacing the digit gingerly, as if it might shatter.

“What the hell is this?” George says.

“We need to leave,” Priya says. “Right now, we need to leave.”

“I think she might be right,” Kristi says.

“Just a little farther,” Sarah says. “Please. I know this is—this is scary, I know. But please…We can’t leave Isabelle here. Please.”

“What makes you think she’s even in this place?” George says.

“I do not want to be here anymore,” Priya says. “We have to *leave*.”

“Sarah,” Kristi says.

Without another word, Sarah walks past the strange rock in the direction the crew was heading, her flashlight spreading its beam across the floor in front of her.

“Hey!” Kristi says.

“What is she doing?” Chad says.

“Making a command decision,” George says.

“Are we going to follow her?” Chad says.

“What choice do we have?” Kristi says. “We already lost Isabelle.” The camera moves after Sarah.

From behind, Priya says, “This is so unfair.”

After the next cut, the screen shows Sarah a half-dozen steps in front of the crew, trailing her light through blackness. “Sarah,” Kristi says. “Wait up.” The others join her in calling Sarah’s name, urging her to slow down. “Come on!” Priya says.

When Sarah stops, it isn’t because of the requests directed at her. Her light slides over the cave floor to her left, illuminating a low line of dark rocks. As she changes direction toward it, so do the others, aiming their lights at her destination. “What now?” George says.

Less than a foot tall, the line is composed of stones fist sized and smaller. They’re black, porous, distinct from the rock on which they’re arranged. At either end, the row connects to a shorter line of the same rock, each of which joins another longer row of rocks, forming a rectangle the dimensions of a large door. The space within it sparkles and flashes in the lights. Chad kneels and reaches into the rectangle, toward the nearest piece of dazzle, only to snatch his hand back with a “Shit!”

“What is it?” Priya says.

“Glass,” Chad says, holding his fingers to display the blood welling from their tips. “It’s filled with broken glass.” He sticks his fingers into his mouth.

“Fuck,” Kristi says.

“What does this mean?” Priya says.

“Yeah, Sarah,” Kristi says, “what the fuck is this?”

“I—” Sarah starts, but George interrupts her: “Shh! Hear that?”

“What?” Kristi says.

“I do,” Priya says.

“What?” Chad says.

“Over here,” George says, waving his light at the blackness on the far side of the stone rectangle. “Listen.”

Everyone falls silent. From what seems a long way away, a faint groan is audible.

“Is that Isabelle?” Chad says.

“Who else would it be?” Kristi says. “Come on.” Now she takes the lead, skirting the edges of the stone design as she heads in the direction of the moaning. “Isabelle!” Kristi shouts. “We’re here!”

In the middle distance, the cave floor shimmers white. This is not the crystalline fracture of broken glass; rather, it’s the flat glow of light on liquid. “What the hell?” Kristi says. She is approaching the shore of a body of water, a lake, judging by the stillness of its surface. Given the limited range of the camera’s light, the lake’s margins are difficult to discern, which gives it the impression of size. This close to the water, the groaning has a curiously hollow quality. The camera swings right, left, and right again. “Isabelle!” Kristi shouts.

The rest of the crew catches up to her. Exclamations of surprise at the lake combine with calls to Isabelle. Flashlight beams chase one another across the water, roam the shore to either side. “Where…?” Kristi says.

“There,” Sarah says, pointing her flashlight to the right. At the very limit of the light’s reach, a pale figure stands in the water, a few feet out. Camera bouncing, the crew runs toward it.

Arms wrapped around herself, Isabelle Router stands in water ankle-deep. Her eyes are closed, her mouth open to emit a wavering moan. Priya splashes into the lake, at Isabelle’s side in half a dozen high steps. When Priya touches her, Isabelle convulses, her groans breaking off. Her eyes remain closed. “It’s all right,” Priya says. “Isabelle, it’s all right. It’s me. It’s Priya. We’re here.”

“Priya?” Isabelle’s voice is a hoarse whisper.

“Yeah,” Priya says, “it’s me. Everyone’s here. We found you. It’s all right.”

Isabelle opens her eyes, lifts her hands against the lights.

“Isabelle,” Sarah says, “are you okay?”

“You’re here,” Isabelle says.

“We are,” Sarah says.

“What happened to you?” Kristi says.

“You’re all right,” Priya says.

Isabelle drops her eyes, mumbles something.

“What?” Priya says.

Her gait stiff-legged, Isabelle sloshes toward the shore. She does not stop once she’s on dry land; rather, she continues barefoot past the crew, the camera tracking her. “Wait a minute,” Kristi says, “where are you going?”

Without looking back, Isabelle says, “Out.”

“That’s it?” Kristi says. “We go to all this trouble and…that’s it? ‘Out’? Really?”

“Kristi,” Sarah says.

“No, she’s right,” Chad says.

Priya steps out of the water. “She’s obviously freaked-out,” she says.

“She’s obviously a pain in my ass,” Kristi says.

“Guys,” Sarah says, “could we have this discussion while we’re keeping up with Isabelle?”

“Yeah,” Chad says, “it’d suck to lose her a second time.”

“Shut up, Chad,” Kristi says.

Three quick scenes show the crew traversing the darkness that lies between the subterranean lake and the tunnel to the mine. Even after she cuts her right foot on a rock, leaving a bloody footprint until the others catch up to her and insist on bandaging it, which George does, Isabelle maintains a brisk pace. She does not let up after they have reentered the mine, though the comments from the others shift from complaint to relief. Throughout, Kristi continues to return to the question of what happened to Isabelle,

asking it at sufficient volume for her to hear; Isabelle, however, does not answer.

Not until they have reached the portrait of the woman nearer the mine's entrance does Isabelle stop. Immobile, she stares at the artwork as the rest of the crew gathers around her.

"What now?" Kristi says.

In reply, Isabelle screams, a loud, high-pitched shriek that startles everyone into stepping back. The scream goes on and on and on, doubling Isabelle over, breaking into static as it exceeds the limits of the recording equipment. While Isabelle staggers from foot to foot, bent in half, her mouth stretched too wide, the soundtrack cuts in and out, alternating her screaming with an electronic hum. The members of the crew stand stunned, their expressions shocked. Tears stream from Isabelle's eyes, snot pours from her nostrils, flakes of blood spray onto her lips and chin. The audio gives up the fight, yielding to the empty hum. Finally, Priya runs to Isabelle, puts her arms around her, and steers her away from the drawing, toward the exit. While she remains doubled over, Isabelle goes with her. Chad and George follow. For a moment, Sarah studies the portrait, then she, too, turns to leave.

The camera remains focused on the wall, at the weird image that so strikingly resembles Isabelle Router. It zooms in, until the half-skeletal portion of the face fills the screen. As it does, the soundtrack recovers. Isabelle is still screaming, the sound echoing down the mine's tunnels. The picture goes black. "Directed by Sarah Fiore" flashes onto the screen in white letters.

"And that's it," Sarah says, freezing the film.

"Huh," I say. I'm suddenly aware that in the time I've spent viewing Sarah's video, the sun has dropped behind Frenchman Mountain, hauling night down after it. The autumn light has slid from the windows at the back of the bar, leaving a tide of blackness pressed against them. I can hear the shouts and shrieks of the trick-or-treaters, somewhere in that darkness. It's absurd, but after spending the last hour immersed in the film's subterranean setting, I have the impression that the blackness of the mine has escaped into the night. I swallow, say, "That's something."

“Larry was worried it was too oblique,” Sarah says. “He liked it, but he thought the film needed developing. I was—it was surreal, you know? I had this documentary I’d put together that showed…I don’t know what, and here was this filmmaker I respected treating it as if it was fiction, and I realized, *Yeah, you could watch it that way,* and then I thought, *Wait, was that what it was?*” She shakes her head.

“Did you ever think of telling him the truth?”

“For about half a second, until he started throwing around budget numbers, talking about possible distributors. All of it was extremely modest, but compared to what I was used to—that, and the chance it represented for me as a director—well, it wasn’t much of a decision.

“My biggest concern was Isabelle. She was in pretty rough shape after we exited the mine. Priya drove her to the ER in Wiltwyck right away. She had stopped screaming not long after Priya took her away from the portrait, but her throat was a mess. She was exhausted, dehydrated, and there was something wrong with her blood: the white blood cell count was too high, or too low; I can’t remember. Anyway, she was in the hospital for a couple of days. I assumed she’d have no interest in a return trip to the mine, to put it mildly, but I felt I owed it to her to fill her in on the new plan.”

“And?”

“And she was completely into it, which was a surprise. She offered to help me with the screenplay, and she had some great ideas. A lot of the Bad Agatha stuff came from her.” Seeing me opening my mouth, Sarah holds up a hand to forestall the inevitable question. “Yes, I asked her what had happened while she was on her own down there. She shrugged off the question, said she’d gotten lost and freaked out. Okay, I said, but what made her leave us in the first place?

“She heard something, what sounded like someone calling her name. She already thought the rest of us were pranking her with the woman’s portrait; she assumed this was more of the same. Her intent was to find whoever was saying her name and kick them in the ass. Instead, she lost track of where she was, and then she had a little bit of a breakdown, and that was all she could remember clearly until she was in the hospital.”

“Did you believe her?”

“Yes,” Sarah says, drawing out the word, “but I was pretty sure there was more she wasn’t telling me. I couldn’t figure out how to persuade her to let me in on it. She told me she was fine with returning to the mine, but I was pretty nervous about it. Honestly, I would have been happier if she’d refused. The problem was, Priya and Chad had already bowed out, which meant we couldn’t use as much of the documentary footage as I wanted. If Isabelle hadn’t agreed, then we would have had to shoot an entirely new film, which might have exceeded our meager budget. So I went with her, and I have to admit, she did a terrific job. For all the years I’d known her, I had no idea she was such a convincing actress.”

“What caused the two of you to fall out?”

Sarah frowns. “Creative differences.”

“Over?”

“A lot of things.” As if she’s just noticed the night outside, Sarah says, “Holy shit. What time is it?” She closes the window on the laptop and squints at the corner clock. “I better go,” she says, folding the computer shut. While she slides it off the table into her bag, I say, “Anything else you’d like to add?”

“It’s funny,” she says, easing out of the booth, “there have been moments when I’ve thought about posting the video online, putting it up on YouTube with no fanfare, letting whoever discovers it make of it what they will. Except, I knew people would view it as a publicity stunt, some old footage I’d stitched together to generate new interest in my movie. I had no plans to mention it during the interview for the anniversary edition, until there I was, talking about it. Once I started, I figured, why not?”

“And people still thought it was a hoax.”

“Yeah. What are you gonna do?”

The walk from the booth to the bar to pay the bill is no more than twelve or fifteen feet, yet it seems to take us an hour to make it. My thoughts are racing, trying to fit what I’ve heard and seen this afternoon with everything else I know about Sarah and the film. After all, I’m the horror writer; it’s why the editors of this publication have asked me to conduct this interview. I’m supposed to judge the veracity of Sarah’s footage and, assuming I accept it as true, trace its connections to *Lost in the Dark*, explain the ways

in which the fiction refracts the facts. It's a favorite critical activity, isn't it? Especially when it comes to the fantastic, demonstrating how it's only the stuff of daily life, after all. The vampire is our repressed eroticism, the werewolf our unreasoning rage. The film Sarah has shown me, though, isn't the material of daily life. I don't know what it is, because to tell you the truth, I'm more of a skeptic than a believer these days. Strange as it sounds, it's one of the reasons I love to write about the supernatural. The stories I tell offer me the opportunity to indulge a sense of the numinous I find all too lacking in the world around me. But this movie…I can't help inventing a story to explain it, something to do with an ancient power captured, brought to a remote location, and imprisoned there. Those dead men at the entrance, maybe they were there as a sacrifice, a way to bind whatever was in that nameless woman to the mine. The stuff inside the tunnels, the caves beyond, was that evidence of someone or someones tending to the woman, worshipping her? And Isabelle Router, her experience underground—was the movie she cowrote an act of devotion to something that found her in the dark? I half remember the line from Yeats about entertaining a drowsy emperor.

None of it makes any sense; it's all constructed with playing cards, waiting for a sneeze to collapse it. I pay the bill, and we walk out of Pete's. The sidewalks have filled with a mass of children and parents making their slow way up Main Street to the library to assemble for the Halloween parade. Zombies stagger along next to Clone troopers, while Batman brings up the rear. Clown parents carry ladybug children. Frankenstein's bride towers over the hobbits surrounding her. Witches whose pointed green chins are visible beneath the broad brims of their black hats talk to fairies sporting flower crowns and wings dusted with sparkles. There's a kid costumed as a hairy dog, an adult dressed as a boxy robot. The grim reaper swings a mean-looking scythe; Hermione Granger flourishes her wand. Vampires in evening dress walk beside superheroes in gaudier colors. A few old-fashioned ghosts flutter like sheets escaped from the clothesline.

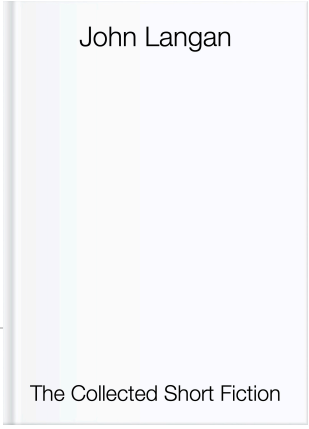
A number of Bad Agathas are part of the procession, one of them quite small. This diminutive form darts through the crowd to where Sarah and I are standing. The mask the girl tilts at us is too big for her. It's an older design, the features angular, the left eye socket a black cavern. Sarah's

eyebrows lift at the sight. The girl raises her right hand. She’s holding a Bad Agatha mask, which she offers to Sarah.

Sarah hesitates, then accepts the mask. Apparently released by her act, the girl sprints away into the costumed ranks. Sarah considers Bad Agatha’s stylized face, as if studying a photograph of an old acquaintance. She turns the mask over, tilts her head forward, and slides Bad Agatha’s face over hers. She straightens, turns to me. Whatever witty remark I was preparing dies on my tongue. Without another word, Sarah turns and joins the parade.

A Song Only Partially Heard

First published in *The Beauty of Death II: Death by Water* (November 2017)



This is the story he doesn't tell.

Not because no one will believe him (although no one would), and not because of the stares he knows his account would provoke, the poorly concealed laughs and muttered remarks ("Crazy," "What the fuck is he talking about?" "Goddamn boss's cousin"). No, the reason Horacio Martinez keeps his story to himself is that it won't make a difference, won't return Hector to life, won't alter the judgement of the sheriff's deputies, who have ruled the death an accident, which Horacio supposes it was, only one with slightly less randomness than the declaration implies.

There's something else, too, a reason under the reason. What he saw, what he heard, not so much when his friend died, but in the moments before and after it, was like nothing his ears and eyes have experienced, not during his decade here, in Wiltwyck, upstate New York, and not during his decade growing up in San Juan. He isn't sure how to describe it; although *holy* occurs to him. It's a term from his childhood, redolent of incense and candlewax, from when he was devout, when he spent each week anticipating the candle he would light at the foot of the Virgin, when his daily dress included his Maltese cross and his scapula, when every morning he checked his children's missal to see which saint's feast day it was. Uttering it now puckers his lips with embarrassment, unless it's as half of a curse. But it attaches itself to Hector's death with a force which will not be denied, and he supposes this means it's correct.

Following the departure of the police, everyone has been sent home with pay for the remainder of the day, a nod to compassion on the part of Cousin Fernando qualified by the fact that the work day had less than an hour left. Shocked as even the older men were by the violence of Hector's end, the

employees were happy to take advantage of the boss's generosity, most of them walking down and across the street to the bar which occupies the ground floor of a large, three-story house on the corner there. No one paid much attention to Horacio, who found it easy to stay behind after the chain-link gate was rolled closed. To be certain his failure to depart wouldn't be noticed, he kept to the other side of the white trailer that serves as Fernando's office, remaining there as the echoes of his coworkers' voices faded into the distance. Once the only sound is the whoosh of a car passing by, Horacio peaks his head around the trailer, confirms the yard is empty, and crosses to where the *Helen Leucoria* sits in her ship cradle.

She's the tug half of an ATB, an articulated tug and barge combination, brought to the shipyard Fernando manages on the northern bank of the Redout Creek for an assortment of repairs and renovations. Her almost comically high bridge has been removed entire and set to one side, where a designated team works on it. A second team labors inside the ship's rounded hull, while a third, to which Hector and Horacio were assigned, has tended to the tug's exterior, inspecting and mending small injuries to the surface, in a couple of places replacing what can't be fixed. Horacio hasn't been at the shipyard long enough to be trusted with any truly significant task, nor does he find the work particularly easy to learn, but once he masters a task, he does so with a thoroughness that has attracted grudging nods from his coworkers, whose respect for him has grown as he has demonstrated himself more competent than his first week on the job indicated (about which, the less said, the better). Though he doesn't care for the work, he finds it oddly satisfying, and as his father is fond of saying, you don't have to like a job if the money is good, which it is. Give Fernando that much credit: he pays his workers well.

Overhead, one of the massive collars that encircle the tug's propellers hangs, like something from a jet. To the right, on the other side of the keel, the space the second collar occupied is empty, the hull torn and hanging down in strips. Directly beneath it, jagged and torn pieces of metal, some the size of windows, doors, begin a path stretching the twenty or so feet to the edge of the yard, where it drops to the surface of the creek seven or eight feet below. On a sunny summer day like this one, you can stand at this ledge and gaze through the clear water at schools of fish maintaining their

positions in the current. This is the spot Hector was when, with an ear-splitting shriek, the collar tore loose from the tug and crashed to the ground, rolling toward the creek, leaving shards of itself behind as it went, revealing the propeller it contained. Tangled with half a dozen lengths of metal, each a razored whip, the propeller struck Hector.

Although he witnessed his friend's death, Horacio isn't certain exactly what he saw happen to him. He isn't sure he wants to know. One instant, Hector was turning to the juggernaut rumbling toward him; the next, he appeared to move in several different directions at once. The propeller and its metal necklace rolled off the edge of the yard into the creek, taking the better part of Hector with it, leaving behind his right arm below the elbow and a slice of his skull, the flesh stubbled from his recent buzz cut. His blood fell from the air in droplets. Already knowing it was too late, Horacio ran to the place his friend had been in time to watch the propeller rock to a halt, half-submerged in the water splashing around it. He saw Hector's leg, caught on a strand of metal wound around one of the propeller's blades. Horacio scanned the water, could distinguish no more of Hector amidst the turbulence the propeller had stirred. But there was something else, between the shore and the propeller, a movement at the creek's churning surface, a shape that glowed crimson and gold with the sunlight, that resolved into a form more shocking than the sight of Hector's leg floating in the Redout. Horacio's glimpse of it lasted for what seemed to be minutes, yet couldn't have been more than a couple of seconds, before he was joined by a handful of the other workers, all searching for Hector and crying out when they saw what remained of him, and the thing beneath the water darted out of view.

It was a woman: why not say that? Because she was like no woman he's ever seen. She was drifting on her back, her long gold hair spreading around her head in a cloud. He guesses she was naked, if that's the right way to describe skin crosshatched with dark red and gold scales. What appeared to be trains of red silk, each the length of her long body, attached to her forearms, her hips, her calves, and rippled in the surrounding water. They reminded him of Ocho, the beta fish Fernando keeps in the office, and he understood that they were fins. From eyes a uniform blue (*Azure*, he thinks), she regarded him, an unreadable expression on her face. Tiny silver

fish darted around her. In her look, he felt the weight of an intelligence ancient and strange.

There was one more detail, a sound, distant and musical, what might have been a song. The memory of it lingers, hours after he (thinks he) heard it. Almost, he can pick out lyrics, though the language is foreign to him. They have a plaintive quality that evokes images of clusters of rocks washed by foaming seas, of the sun high and unforgiving in a blue, blue sky. *Come*, the lyrics seem to be pleading, *come here, join us below the waves, where everything is calm, peaceful. Come to the peace of the kelp forests, of the eel dens, of the lobster roads. Come down to where ships lie in quiet rust and rot. Come let the small crabs and fish feast on you, give yourself to the sea, to the sea, to peace.*

This, the woman with her trailing red fins, her blue eyes on him, the song he (thinks he) heard, comprise the secret story, the experience he cannot help thinking of as holy. There is no doubt in his mind that Hector was gripped by a similar but more intense version of it in the minutes leading up to the accident. Horacio noticed him at the edge of the yard, his head tilted toward the creek. Nothing remarkable about that, but in the final moment of his life, as Hector turned to the mass of metal screeching toward him, Horacio saw reflected in his friend's face an experience of profound beauty. It was as if a beam of light were shining directly on his features, illuminating them, casting them into sharper relief. Horacio was reminded of endless paintings of ecstatic saints, bathed in the light of God. When the propeller and its looping shards struck him, Hector must have thought the beauty that illuminated him was killing him.

Or so Horacio imagines. He walks out from under the *Helen Leucosia*. Police tape flutters around the path of metal fragments leading to the edge of the yard. There, patches of Hector's blood still stain the ground. In the creek, the propeller rises like a bizarre idol. Hector's leg has been retrieved from it, along with what other pieces of him the police divers could locate. Horacio gives the men their due: they worked for a good couple of hours, searching for and retrieving his friend's remains with care and deliberation. With the exception of his left hand and a scoop of his lower back, the divers succeeded in recovering all of Hector, for which Horacio is grateful to a degree that surprises him. He is unclear whether the search for those last

fragments of Hector will continue tomorrow, or if as much of him has been found as is going to be; he suspects the latter. In which case, assuming the police give the okay, the early part of the morning will be spent lifting the propeller from the Redout, inspecting it, and deciding if whatever damage it suffered can be repaired, or if a replacement will have to be ordered.

Horacio would like to see the propeller melted down, destroyed, but he assumes this is unlikely. Though battered and dented by its murderous transit, the propeller appears basically sound, able to be fixed, and a new one would be expensive, much more costly than the life of a man from Santo Domingo who enjoyed spending his Sunday afternoons with his girlfriend and her daughter, picnicking one place or another. Horacio's first, disastrous week at the shipyard, Hector invited him to join them that weekend, which he did, and while he had little to say to either Megan or Ella, he appreciated their smiling friendliness enough to join the three of them again a couple of weeks later, and intermittently thereafter, as recently as this past Sunday, when the four of them took an order of Chinese takeout to the picnic benches at Wiltwyck Point, an arm of land reaching into the Hudson. As Ella tip-toed across the rocky beach to splash in the river, Megan calling after her not to go too far, Hector and Horacio studied the boats traveling the water, from the sailboats whose sails belled from their masts, to the speedboats galloping from the crest of one wave to the next, to a combined ATB making its slow way south. Unlike Horacio, Hector loved boats, loved working on them, loved being out on them. He named the different types of sailboats, the horsepower of the speedboats' engines, the top speed of an articulated tug with and without its barge. This afternoon, he was most interested by an enormous oil tanker which had dropped anchor a couple of hundred yards north of them, almost beneath the Wiltwyck-Rhinecliff Bridge. "That's an old one," he said. "Early sixties. Didn't know any of them were still in service. Can you see what flag she's flying? I swear, my eyes are no good anymore." Horacio squinted, but did not recognize the colors. "It's gray," he said, "or black, with some kind of design on it in yellow. I think it's a triangle, but the sides are all wavy. That could be the wind, though. Whose flag is that?" Hector didn't know, nor could either of them read the letters in which the tanker's name and country of origin were written. Hector ventured they were Russian or Greek;

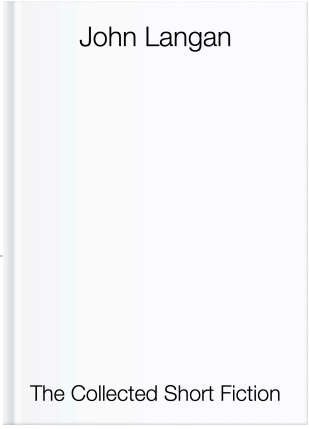
Horacio guessed Thai or Sanskrit. Later, as they were packing up to leave, they saw water venting from a hatch in the tanker's flank. "They aren't supposed to do that," Hector said, frowning. "What?" Horacio said. "The water," Hector said, pointing to the green stream foaming into the Hudson. "That's sea water. They use it for ballast, to keep the ship stable. They aren't allowed to dump it up here. This is fresh water. Who knows what's in that shit?" Horacio shrugged. "What can you do?"

What can you do? He doesn't know what he expects, standing here as the creek eddies round the propeller. Another glimpse of the strange woman? To hear her song as Hector did, in all its terrible loveliness? To what end? He shakes his head. He feels himself caught in a narrative whose parameters he cannot identify, a minor character moved by a plot he does not understand. Disgust twists his lip, propels him away from the water at a brisk pace. If he hurries, maybe he can catch up to the others at the bar.

If he remained in place, staring into the water, would he make out the woman floating a half-dozen feet down, amidst a grove of green weeds, her fins wrapping around her like red robes? Would he see Hector's hand in hers? Would he watch her lift it to her perfect mouth, take one of the fingers between her lips, and strip the waterlogged flesh from the bones with her narrow, razored teeth?

The Deep Sea Swell

First published in *The Devil and the Deep: Horror Stories of the Sea* (March 2018)



"It may be that the gulfs will wash us down"
—Alfred Lord Tennyson, *Ulysses*

If she hadn't argued with the man, Susan thinks, they could have been in a first-class cabin, instead of down here, at the bottom of the bloody ferry. The floor tilts forward. There's a great swooshing sound, the sensation of plunging down a steep slope, the briefest of pauses, and a tremendous BANG rattles the ship's hull. Slowly, the floor levels, then tilts backward. The swooshing returns, accompanied now by the feeling of being on a roller coaster as it climbs a sheer set of tracks. Somewhere near, somewhere inside the ferry, Susan hears the steady drone of a motor. The sweet stink of fuel (diesel?) swirls near the floor, below her bunk. On the bunk above, her husband snores intermittently. The Dramamine they took an hour ago knocked Alan out, the lucky bastard—whereas all it did for Susan was sand the edges off the dizziness and nausea, freeing her mind to run through every disaster-at-sea movie she's seen, from *Titanic* to *The Poseidon Adventure* to a cheesy horror film, what was it called, *Leviathan*? Something like that.

The sail up from Aberdeen wasn't this bad, not nearly. She'd never been on an ocean-going ferry before. The nearest thing had been the ship they'd taken out to Martha's Vineyard on their honeymoon, which was maybe half the size of this one? Less? The Shetland ferry was built to cross the roughly two hundred nautical miles between the northeast of Scotland and the Shetlands, which, as Alan delighted in saying, lay closer to Norway than they did to the UK. There was something romantic about traveling by ship, she'd thought, a notion of taking your time, enjoying the journey as well as the destination. They spent much of their time in bed, trying to work out the mechanics of sex on a surface rising and falling with the sea. She was Sexy Susan, the sailor's friend; he was Able Alan, always up for adventure.

That was in the first-class cabin to which they'd been upgraded after she passed one of the ship's crew a twenty-pound note. She'd been quite pleased with the luxury—which consisted primarily of a room done in seventies-era paneling and set high enough in the ship to have its own window—but less so once they'd been in Lerwick for a day and Alan's university friend, Giorgio, informed her that, as long as there were cabins available, the ferry staff were supposed to upgrade passengers free of charge. "They pocket the money, you know," Giorgio said, letting the air out of her self-satisfaction, and leaving her determined not to be taken advantage of again. In turn, this led to her challenging the crew member who requested twenty quid for a boost to first-class lodgings on the return voyage. (Possibly, it was the same man: several of the staff appeared related, cousins or even brothers, short, broad fellows wearing gray sweater vests under their blue blazers and over their shirt-and-ties, their faces red, their curly hair black yielding to gray.) "You know," Susan said, "one of my friends in Lerwick told me an upgrade to first class is supposed to be no charge."

"Did they?" the man said, raising his bushy eyebrows as if to indicate his surprise at such a statement.

"Yeah," she said, nodding.

"Well …" The man smiled, shrugging and spreading his hands.

"My friend said you guys keep the money."

Whatever warmth was in the man's performance chilled. "It's twenty pounds," he said.

Which was how they descended she isn't certain how many flights of stairs to the corridor that brought them here, to a narrow room with bare white walls and a pair of economy-sized bunkbeds in it. "Think of it this way," Alan said, "we're experiencing the full range of travel options."

Those options included a mid-winter storm, whose center lay somewhere to the east, but which had stirred the North Sea to a tumult. They climbed to the dining area, but already, Alan was queasy and opted for a cup of tea and a packet of digestive biscuits, leaving Susan to order a Coke and the fish and chips, which she ate half of before a sudden squall of nausea caused her to set down her knife and fork and not pick them up again. The two of them

tried sitting in the large padded chairs positioned in front of the wall of windows looking out over the ferry's stern, but night had fallen hours ago, with the heavy blackness of early January at a northern latitude. All that was visible was an expanse of blackness with a cluster of orange lights twinkling in the far distance, which Alan thought was an oil rig. Although the sea was more sound than sight, the rise and fall of those lights added a visual dimension to the ferry's see-sawing movement. "Next time Giorgio wants to see us," Alan said, "we'll fly." It was an extravagant promise: the tickets from Edinburgh weren't too far shy of what it had cost them to cross the Atlantic from Newark.

"Or he can take the ferry," Susan said.

Not long after, they descended the stairs to their cabin a second time. Gazing out the windows wasn't doing anything for him, Alan said, and Susan agreed. The more she stared at it, the more uneasy the dark outside—its sheer thoroughness—made her, until she could feel panic nipping at the edges of her mind. "It's as if we're already at the bottom of the sea," she said.

"Whoa," Alan said, "touch wood," knocking the chair's armrest. "Although," he added, "it's pretty deep, here. I imagine it's calm, down there."

"You just have to go through the whole drowning thing," Susan said.

"Will you *stop*?" Alan said, rapping the armrest again.

"You and your superstitions."

"The middle of the ocean is not the place to test them."

She supposed he had a point.

In the cabin, they dry-swallowed the Dramamine tablets Susan had in her bag, changed into their pajamas, and climbed into their bunks. Alan sang, "Yo-ho, blow the man down / Yo-ho, blow the man down."

"Now who's tempting fate?" she said.

"It's only a song," he said, his words slurring as the pill tugged him into unconsciousness.

"Remember that when we're saying hi to King Neptune."

“Hey,” he began. The rest of his reply disappeared into a mumble.

Despite herself, Susan knocked on the cabin wall. It wasn’t wood, but it was the best she had.

The next hour passed with stomach-churning monotony. The ferry rose and fell, rose and fell. Alan snored, snorted, went back to snoring. The distant engine churned steadily. In the corridor outside the cabin, a little girl’s voice asked a question Susan couldn’t decipher. The ocean rushed along the hull. A woman, likely the girl’s mother, said they were just going for a wee lie down. The smell of fuel made Susan’s nostrils bristle. Someone laughed as they passed the cabin. The ship slid down into a pause that lasted a second too long, as if the waves were weighing whether to let the vessel continue its descent, all the way down. A woman, the same one from before, said she was just going to the toilet. The sea smacked the ship like a giant’s hand, BANG.

In an odd sort of way, Susan has thought, the trip has been all about the ocean, salt water threading its way through her and Alan’s winter vacation like a recurring theme in a longer piece of music. The flight across the north Atlantic was only the second time she had traversed the ocean, and she spent the daylit hours of the voyage gazing out the scuffed and scratched window beside her seat at the corrugated gray expanse visible through the gaps in the clouds below. Alan’s parents’ house in North Queensferry was one of a half-dozen on a cul-de-sac set on a high bluff overlooking the stretch where the Forth River merged with the North Sea. The sea was a constant companion as they drove their tiny rental up Scotland’s east coast, stopping for an early lunch at an Indian place outside St. Andrew’s, a wander around the ruins at Stonehaven, and then a couple of days in Aberdeen, revisiting Alan’s university haunts and a few of his friends who had settled in the city. With one of those friends and his partner, they walked a rocky beach washed by the waves they would ride to Shetland, where Alan’s friend Giorgio ran a small chip shop overlooking Lerwick harbor. (“Giorgio?” Susan said. “What kind of Scottish name is that?” “His dad’s from Florence,” Alan said.)

Once they were ashore on Shetland, however, something about the sea changed—or, to be more accurate, something about her perception of it shifted. The afternoon of their arrival, Giorgio took them for a quick jaunt

to a spot where the land on either side of them shrank toward the road, until they were between a pair of narrow beaches onto which water splashed in long foaming rolls. “On that side,” Giorgio said, pointing right, “is the North Sea. On this side,” pointing left, “is the Atlantic.” No matter where they went, it seemed, salt water was visible. When she mentioned this to Giorgio, trying to keep her tone light, care free, he nodded and said, “Aye, someone told me once you’re never more than three miles from open water on Shetland.” No doubt the landscape of the island, low hills bare of trees, contributed to the sensation, but she began to feel horribly exposed, surrounded by the ocean, which, if you thought about it, could rise and wash over the place without much effort at all.

Nor did the stories Giorgio liked to tell help matters. An amateur historian of the Shetlands and their surrounds, he possessed a seemingly endless supply of narratives about the islands. In the majority of them, the sea figured prominently. They would begin with a bold, almost ridiculous assertion. “You know,” he would say over drinks at one of the pubs, “Shetland was part of the actual Atlantis.” Then, as she and Alan coughed their beers, he would raise his hands and say, “No, I’m not talking about that Disney rubbish. I mean Doggerland. You’ve heard of it, yeah? No? Ten, eleven thousand years ago, during the last ice age, all the seas were lower. The water was bound up in the glaciers, right? From Shetland down to Orkney and Scotland, over to Europe, was dry land. You could walk across the North Sea, the English Channel, and folk did. There was a whole civilization spread across the place. As the ice started to melt, though, the sea crept closer. Some of the archeologists think it was a process of years, decades, and the people living there had plenty of time to pack their things and leave. I’ve heard others say it was more catastrophic, an ice dam broke and sent hundreds of millions of gallons of water rushing through all this low-lying land. That’s where your story of Atlantis comes from.”

Another afternoon, as they were sitting in Giorgio’s car on a local (smaller) ferry from the main island to the neighboring island of Yell, Giorgio said, “When you were coming up, did you notice there was a point the sea went all choppy—I mean, worse than what you’d been used to?” Susan and Alan exchanged glances. Had they? “Maybe,” Alan said. “Aye, that was you passing Fair Isle,” Giorgio said. “The sea behaves funny there, has to do

with currents or some such. You know there was a fellow drowned out there? It was during my granddad's time, a man from down in Edinburgh, a professor—from Edinburgh University, must have been. He was an anthropologist, studied the prehistoric sites in the north of Scotland, the Orkneys, up in Shetland. The chap took an interest in Fair Isle—in the ocean floor off the island. Something had washed up on one of the island's beaches, and it found its way into the professor's hands. I'm not sure what it was, but it got the man all worked up. He decided he needed to have a look under the water next to the island. This was none of your scuba diving; this was one of those suits with the big round helmet and the hose up to a boat on the surface. Fellow hired a couple of locals out of Aberdeen to man the boat and mind the air pump, and another pair of lads from Fair Isle to help them. The lot of them took the boat to the spot the professor had calculated was the best bet to search for more of whatever it was brought him there in the first place. Over the side he went. The rig was what you'd call low-tech, no diver's telephone. Well. Maybe an hour into the professor's dive, a storm blew in. The sky went dark, the wind rose, and the next anyone knew, the rain was bucketing down, the waves spilling over the sides. It's no fun to be in a big ship when the weather turns against you, and this boat was far from big. At first, the lads thought they could ride out the storm. I gather they gave it their best, but it wasn't long before they realized theirs was not a workable plan. The sea was heaving, and none of them had the experience to maintain the ship's position in these conditions. They tried to contact the professor—there was no telephone, right, but they had this system of bells he'd set up for basic communication. One bell on the boat, and a tiny one in the helmet. I'm not sure exactly how it worked. Morse Code, I'm guessing—had to be. Anyway, as things went from bad to worse topside, the crew were signaling the professor, SOS, COME BACK. If he heard them, he didn't answer. Now the boat was riding waves halfway to vertical. Water was foaming onto the deck from every side. It was all the lads could do to keep from being swept overboard. And still no response from the professor. Funny, the things you'll do in a crisis. One of the crew grabbed a hatchet and, *chop*, cut the diving suit's air hose. It was the end for the professor. You have to hope he found whatever he was looking for." Susan said, "That's terrible. What happened to the crew?" "Oh," Giorgio said, "they made it back safely. Went straight to the police and confessed everything.

Only problem was, each man said he was the one had picked up the hatchet, and nothing anyone could threaten or promise would persuade any of them to change his story. In the end, none of them was charged, and the professor's death was ruled an accident. The body was never recovered."

Still a third time, as they were treating Giorgio to dinner at a nice restaurant in a small hotel located on the shore of a slender inlet, he set down his salad fork and said, "There's a ghost in this hotel, you know, right in this very room. A woman dressed in a long dark green dress and a short jacket, with a little hat. Like the style women wore at the beginning of the last century. She sits at one of the tables over there." He pointed to an alcove at the other end of the dining area. "It's always after the last customer has left, and one of the staff is cleaning up. I used to date a lassie had seen her on two separate occasions. The first time, she ran out of the room as if the Devil himself was clutching at her heels with his pointy nails. The second time, Colleen (that was the lassie's name) stayed put. She said the woman stood, turned around, and walked to the door. Her face was in shadow, that was the way Colleen described it. She couldn't manage a good look at her. She said the woman passed through the door, the way you hear ghosts doing. Colleen ran to the door and opened it. Although it was late, this was during the summer, so there was plenty of light for her to watch the woman cross the lawn to the water and keep going, out into it until she was gone, submerged, hat and all. No one knows who she is, or was. Another drowning victim, right? Sometimes I wonder, though: what if we have it backwards? What I'm trying to say is, instead of someone who used to live on land returning to it, maybe it's someone, or something, whose home is the water coming up to have a look and see what all the fuss is about." "Really?" Susan said. "No," Giorgio said, "I'm just speaking out my arse. Still, the ocean is deep and dark and full of secrets, right? Isn't there a saying to the effect that we know more about outer space than we do the bottom of the sea?" "I don't know," Alan said, "sounds good, though." "Aye, so it does," Giorgio said.

Between Giorgio's stories, and the omnipresent water rolling to the horizon, Susan found herself revising her opinions of life beside the ocean. Since she and Alan had met at a mutual friend's house in Bourne, on the mainland side of the Cape Cod Canal, Susan had declared it her fondest wish to return to the area to buy a house overlooking the ocean. It was a

favorite fantasy, one she indulged by scrolling through online real-estate listings. If such houses were currently out of their price range (by a factor of several hundred percent), it was of no real concern. Alan was doing well enough at his architecture firm to make the daily commute to Manhattan worthwhile, and the director of Penrose College's art museum was sufficiently pleased with her performance to hire Susan full-time. They saved what they could, and eventually, they would be in a position to afford a place in Bourne, or further out on the actual Cape, in Orleans or even Wellfleet. In the meantime, they had their friend's house to return to. Her dream was in part a declaration of loyalty to the place where she and Alan had so improbably found one another. But she also fancied the Cape an appropriate symbol for the relationship they had discovered, a place of fundamentals, land and sea and sky. Not once had it occurred to her that part of the reason she could appreciate the Bay at Scusset Beach was because the entire continent was behind her, thousands of miles of mountains and hills, cities and plains. Even way out on the end of the Cape, in Provincetown, there was the sense of being connected to something larger, a solid mass of land. Five days on Shetland, and she had learned that being on the margin between sand and water was a different thing from being surrounded by the ocean. Giorgio diagnosed what she described to him as island fever. "It's not for everyone, living up here," he said. "The sea …" He shrugged, as if the word was explanation enough.

BANG. As if making Giorgio's point, the water smacks the hull directly outside her bunk, from the sound of it. The metal groans, a loud complaint, which lasts an ominous length of time. Susan stares at the wall next to her. The dread she's been managing since they sailed into the storm surges within her. Her heart breaks into a full gallop. Should she wake Alan, grab their bags, head for the upper decks, closer to the lifeboats? She doesn't know. She can't draw enough air into her lungs. The edges of her vision darken. She's burning up. The panic attack isn't the first she's had, but it's without doubt the worst. She can't keep lying down; she's suffocating. She throws off her blanket, sits up as the ferry begins another slide down down down … She grips the edge of her bunk, braces her feet against the floor. BANG. The ship protests, asking how much more of this abuse it's expected to take. Susan has to get out of here. She grabs Alan's bunk, uses

it to haul herself to standing. On the other side of the hull, water swooshes as the floor tilts back. She crosses to the door in four lurching steps, opens it, and exits the cabin.

The corridor outside the room is empty, the rest of the cabin doors shut. No sign of the little girl and her mother, the laughing passer-by. Susan isn't so distracted she can't think, *Well, good for them.* One hand on the wall, she turns left, toward the stairs. The ferry levels, tips, lunges. The wool socks she's wearing slide on the floor. She flattens on the wall. BANG. The impact shudders through her. While the ship tilts to climb the next swell, she scuttles along the wall as fast as her feet and hands will move her, which isn't as fast as she'd like, but it occupies her while the ferry slides up and then down. BANG. By the time the ship has summited the following waves, Susan has reached the doorway to the stairs. *Alan*, a distant part of her mind objects, *what about Alan?* She plunges into the stairwell.

It's like trying to play some demented fun-house game, climbing the stairs as they rock this way, then that. Although each stair is covered in studs to aid traction, they benefit her socks little, and she clings to the guard rail with both hands. The acoustics of the space make it sound as if the water streaming past the ship is filling the stairwell, while each BANG shivers all the stairs at once. She manages four flights, two decks, before she has to abandon the stairwell.

As she emerges into a corridor more or less the same as the one she left, the lights dim, then brighten, then go out. "Oh, come on," she says. With a click, emergency lights pop on at either end of the corridor. "Thank you." She backs against the wall to her left and slides down it until she's sitting. Her heart is still racing, but the short excursion she's taken has left her exhausted. Maybe it's the Dramamine having more effect, too. If it weren't for her pulse jackhammering, she'd swear she would pass out right here. She places her hands on the floor to either side of her to help with the ferry's relentless rocking, which feels as if it's grown worse. *We must be close to Fair Isle*, she thinks. *Isn't that the place Giorgio said the sea was especially rough?*

Another BANG and a horrible smell floods her nostrils. She claps her hand over her mouth. For an instant, she wonders if a sewage pipe has broken under the waves' pounding, only to reject the idea. What assaults her

nostrils is not the pungent stink of shit. It's the reek of a beach—of a North Atlantic beach at low tide, a medley of decaying flesh and baking plant matter. Tears blur her eyes. At the same time, the temperature in the corridor drops, heat escaping as if out of a hole in the ferry's side. The cold that swirls into its place is thick, gelid. There's something else, a note in the atmosphere that reminds her of nothing so much as the worst arguments she and Alan have had, when hostility foams and froths between them. Malice washes over her. She swallows, shakes her head.

To her left, movement on the floor draws her eye. An eel, long and skinny, slithers away from her. She starts. It isn't an eel: it's a length of hose, dun-colored, the end closest to her ragged, vomiting water as it moves. That's the source of the awful smell, the cracked and peeling hose being dragged towards and through the doorway at the far end of the corridor, making a sound halfway between a hiss and a breath. She can't see what's on the other side of the threshold; the emergency lights cast a veil of brightness her vision cannot pierce.

Even were she not schooled in hundreds of horror films, Susan would know that following the foul-smelling hose to whatever is dragging it would be a bad idea. In fact, she has no intention of hanging around here one second longer than is necessary. She pushes to her feet, and staggers up the corridor to the exit to the stairs.

Up or down? She opts to climb. It's slow going. The stairs are like an enormous metronome. She loses her footing twice, has to clutch the railing to keep from tumbling down. Her heart is still pounding, her skin burning, but she isn't sure if it's from the panic attack continuing or her brush with what was standing beyond the lights at the other end of the corridor. *Or both*, she thinks, one of her favorite rhetorical sayings returning to haunt her: *Why does it have to be either/or? Why can't it be both/and?* When the water smacks the hull, the BANG echoes through the stairwell like thunder. The best Susan can do is two flights of stairs, and then she stumbles out the doorway to the next deck. The motion of the ship combines with her slick footing to send her into the wall opposite; she catches most of the impact with her arms, but the force drops her to one knee.

At least the lights are working properly on this level. The revelation, however, is accompanied by another: the terrible smell permeates the air

here, too, and with it are the same cold and the same impression of overwhelming malevolence. A noise equal parts a breath and a hiss jerks her head up, to watch a peeling and cracked hose snaking along the floor. *How … ?* The thing drawing the hose toward it halts the thought. Susan has the impression of a figure the approximate size and shape of a man, its hide studded with barnacles, strung with seaweed, a single round eye staring out of its misshapen head. Hatred rolls off it in waves. Before her mind can process what she's looking at, she's back in the stairwell, her legs propelled not so much by fear as by some deeper impulse, something preceding and pre-empting rational thought. (*How … ?*) The same response sends her down the stairs, flight after flight, until she's back where she started, at the deck where Alan lies slumbering on his bunk in their cabin. *Alan*: for the first time in what feels an eternity, she thinks of her husband as more than a name. What if he woke to find her missing? What if he went in search of her, and encountered whatever is stalking the hallways? Fear for him runs down her spine like ice water. She staggers across the tilting floor into the corridor.

The monster is waiting for her. It swipes at her with oversized hands, and would probably have her if her feet didn't slip and dump her on her ass. The pain registers dimly; she's already scooting backward, her attempted escape hindered by the floor tilting her toward the monster. It leans to grab her legs, spilling a rain of tiny green crabs onto them. Susan jerks her legs toward her, avoiding the thing's grasp, and slaps at the crabs scrambling over her pajamas. She twists onto her stomach, crawls for the stairwell. The ferry levels, and she pushes to her feet. Stiff-legged as Frankenstein's monster, the thing lurches after her. The floor slopes forward. Struggling not to lose control of her balance, she slides on the soles of her socks, as if ice-skating. The monster's feet clatter behind her. She's almost at the stairwell. The sea pounds the ferry, BANG. The monster reaches, catches her left arm, and swings her in a long arc all the way around it into the wall. She tries to get her right arm up to protect her head, but she still sees a brilliant flash of white, feels the impact rattle her teeth. The monster releases her arm, steps in close, catches her by the shoulders. She's spun to face it, pressed against the wall by heavy hands.

This close, the stench brings her to the verge of fainting. Arctic cold envelops her, extinguishing the heat the panic attack kindled in her skin. She twists from side to side, trying to loosen the thing's hold on her, but its grip is unbreakable. Its eye flashes. Malice batters her, its ferocity utter, unrelenting. She turns her head from the thing, closes her eyes—

—and she is somewhere else, a place mostly dark, here and there dim, an expanse of bare mud ornamented with rocks. Slender, shadowy forms, each the size of a large dog, float languidly in the air, and she sees that they're fish, which means she's underwater, from the look of things, somewhere deep. In front of her and to the right, maybe twenty yards away, a light spreads a yellow cone through the murk. It's a large flashlight, carried in one hand by a figure wearing a diving suit, rounded helmet and all. Its air hose rising behind it, its heavy boots raising clouds of mud, it trudges toward a low heap of rocks. Long, rectangular, the rocks have a consistency of size and shape, which gives them the appearance of having been carved into their present forms. When the flashlight's beam illuminates designs grooved into their surfaces, Susan understands that she's looking at an archeological site, that she's watching the protagonist of Giorgio's Fair Isle diver story as he sees the object of his expedition. (Which means …) *His flashlight ranges over the stones, picking out symbols she doesn't recognize, concentric circles, a triangle with rounded corners, a crescent like a smile. Other characters are obscured by mud and algae. The arrangement of the stones suggests they've fallen over onto one another. Before one of them, the diver stops, directs the flashlight to a spot immediately in front of him. Something flashes in the mud. Slowly, ponderously, the diver kneels, reaching down with his free hand. He brushes away a layer of mud, and as he does, sends a small white object tumbling up from its resting place. It's a wonder that he's able to catch it, but catch it he does, and holds it up for view. Susan is too far away to see his discovery in much detail. It's circular, the diameter of a saucer, composed of a white material that shines in the flashlight beam. The diver turns it over, examines the other side, then slides it into a bag hung down his chest. He rises and continues toward the piled stones. As he draws closer to them, his flashlight seeks out the gaps between the rectangles. What it reveals quickens his pace. At the pile, he bends forward, bringing his helmet as close as he can manage to one of the larger*

spaces between them, holding the flashlight beside his helmet. He slides his other hand into the gap. Whatever he's after resists his efforts. He withdraws the flashlight and turns to the side, to extend his reach. He doesn't see the slender white hand shoot out from the space and grab his arm. By the time he's aware of the contact, the hand has pressed his arm further down into the gap, where the space narrows, wedging it there. The diver pulls back, but his arm is stuck fast. The hand retreats amidst the stones. The diver releases his flashlight, which is looped to his wrist, and attempts to use his free hand to pull the other free. It's no use. He pulls; he pushes. He shakes his trapped hand with such fury, Susan can imagine his screams ringing in his helmet. He stops, lets go of his hand and turns as best he can to look behind him. Undulating like a sea serpent, the air hose to his suit descends the water, bubbles venting from its torn end as it falls. Frantically, the diver flails at the back of his suit, where the hose attaches, but he can't maneuver his arm to it. Even if he could grab hold of the hose, it's hard to see what good it would do him. The same thought appears to occur to the diver, who surrenders his attempt. As the hose snakes across the mud, he turns again to the stone heap, sagging against it, his helmet coming to rest above the space that has trapped him. If he isn't dead already, he will be soon. The white hand steals from between the stones and trails its fingers across his faceplate, almost lovingly—

Susan recoils from the sight, and confronts the monster holding her, which, she sees, is no monster, but the diving suit in which Giorgio's professor met his watery end. The barnacles, the seaweed, the tiny green crabs scuttling across it, are the yield of decades beneath the water, as are the dents that have misshapen the helmet, the cracks spider-webbing the faceplate's glass. It has looped the hose around itself like a bandolier. She can't say if there's anything left of the suit's former inhabitant, though she doubts it. What has remained is his anger, his rage at having made the find of his career, of his life, and then been abandoned to death. Contained in the suit, his fury, burning with the blinding flame of an underwater welder's torch, has sustained it, has maintained its integrity long after time, salt water, and the ministrations of a thousand ocean creatures should have dissolved the garment.

It is terrifying; she has to escape it. She drives the heel of her right palm into the faceplate, hears a chorus of snaps. The helmet draws back, as if surprised. She strikes again, missing the faceplate, hitting the metal beside it with a hollow bong. A surge of hatred blasts her. When she tries a third blow, the thing releases her left shoulder to swat her hand away. It catches her by the throat and squeezes. Never mind that she was years from birth when the professor drowned, that she hasn't the slightest connection to this tragedy. She is here now, the accident of her presence as good a reason for the thing's hostility as any. Fingers thick and cold dig into her neck. She grabs its hand, searching to pry open its grip. It is inhumanly strong. She cannot breathe. Her vision contracts. Somewhere distant, the sea strikes the ferry's hull, BANG. She lets go of the hand, opts for another round of blows, punching the suit's shoulders, chest, striking the hose wound around it, searching for a last-second vulnerability. Her knuckles tear on barnacles, slip on seaweed, rebound from the hose wrapping it. *Oh, Alan,* she thinks. Her arms feel incredibly heavy. She can't have much time left. *Goddamn it,* she thinks, *Goddamn it,* the curse summoning a last surge of strength. Muscles screaming for oxygen, she punches as hard and fast as she can, *one two three four*.

With a crack, her right fist connects with an object that breaks under its impact. There's a burst of something between them, a soundless explosion. The hands at her neck and shoulder fall away. Gasping for air, Susan collapses into the wall, her fists still out in a trembling attempt at a guard. The diver steps away from her, its hands pushing aside the hose, searching through the seaweed decorating its chest, to a woven bag hung from its neck. Within the bag, the shards of a white disk slide against one another. The damage to the bag's contents confirmed, the diver's hands drop to its sides. The cold is bleeding from the air, taking with it the awful smell. The figure retreats another pace. Its malevolence gutters and puffs out. Susan has the impression of something *behind* the suit, retreating at great speed through the wall, out of the ship, an impossible distance. On slightly unsteady legs, it lumbers to the exit and proceeds into the stairwell. Its heavy boots clank on the metal stairs.

She feels no desire to follow. With a kind of visionary certainty, she knows that the diver is going to continue its climb until it reaches a level that

admits to the ferry's exterior. If enough of its animating force remains, it will walk to a bulwark, lean forward, and allow the weight of its helmet to carry it over into the heaving waves. If not, one or the other of the crew members will come across an astonishing discovery, the remains of an old diving suit, apparently washed onto the ferry by the storm. Perhaps they'll examine the contents of the bag around its neck, perhaps the professor will receive his recognition yet. Or perhaps not.

For the moment, all Susan wants to do is to return to the cabin where she hopes she will find her husband fast asleep. There's still a long way to go and the storm has not abated. In the morning, Alan will ask her why she's wearing gloves and a scarf. She'll say that she'll tell him once they're back at his parents', safely removed from the sea, and all its marvels and horrors.

Haak

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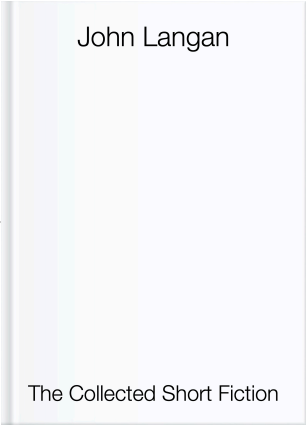


Today Mr Haringa was wearing a scarlet waistcoat with gold trim and gold buttons under his usual tweed jacket and over his usual shirt and tie. A gold watch chain looped out of the waistcoat's right pocket, through which the outline of a large pocket watch was visible. While Mr Haringa was required to dress professionally, as were all staff and students at Quinsigamond Academy, he did so without the irony and even mockery evident in the wardrobe choices of many students and not a few of his colleagues: cartoon-character ties, movie-print blouses, black Doc Martens. His jackets and trousers were in dark, muted colours, his white button-down shirts equally unassuming, and his half-Windsor-knotted ties tended to blue and forest-green tartans. If he added a sweater vest to the day's ensemble, which he did as fall crisped and stripped the leaves of the school's oaks, then that garment matched the day's colour scheme. "It's like he *likes* dressing this way," the occasional student muttered, and though delivered disparagingly, the remark sounded fundamentally accurate.

For Mr Haringa to appear in so extravagant, so ornate an article of clothing was worthy of commentary from the majority of the student body and a significant minority of his fellow teachers; although the conversation only circled, and did not veer toward, him. Aside from the scarlet-and-gold waistcoat, whose material had the dull shine of age, Mr Haringa behaved in typical fashion, returning essays crowded with stringent corrections and unsparing comments, lecturing on the connection between Coleridge's *Rime of the Ancient Mariner* and Robert Bloch's "Yours Truly, Jack the Ripper" to his two morning sections, and discussing the possible impact of Maturin's *Melmoth the Wanderer* on Browning's "Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came" with the first of his afternoon classes. By his second class, the change in his attire had receded in the students' notice.

A few in the final session wondered if the waistcoat was related to that date on the course syllabus, which had been left uncharacteristically blank. They had completed two weeks of exhaustive analysis of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, during which they had lingered at each stop on Marlow's journey into the interior of the African continent to meet the elusive and terrible Kurtz, examining sentences, symbols, and allusions with the care of naturalists cataloguing a biosphere. Ahead lay a selection of Yeats's poetry, including "Second Coming," which several students had mentioned they knew already but which Mr Haringa assured them they did not. This afternoon, however, was a white space, unmapped terrain. As the rest of the syllabus was a study in meticulous planning, it seemed impossible for the gap to be anything other than intentional.

When Mr Haringa entered the room, he strode to the desk, removed his jacket and hung it on the back of his chair, loosened the knot of his tie, pulled it from his neck, draped it over the jacket, and unbuttoned the top button of his shirt. Had he appeared stark naked, the students could not have been more shocked. He extracted the pocket watch from the waistcoat and opened it. Although gold, or gold-plated, its surface was scratched and dented. With his left hand, he gave the crown a succession of quick turns. Roused to life, the timepiece emitted a loud, sharp ticking. Watch in hand, Mr Haringa said, "Anyone who wants to leave is free to do so. For next class, please be sure to read 'Sailing to Byzantium' and be prepared to discuss it."

The students exchanged glances. Mr Haringa offering them the opportunity to depart class before the bell—after one or two minutes past the bell—was almost as startling as the scarlet waistcoat, the removal of his jacket and tie. One of the better students raised her hand. Mr Haringa nodded at her. She cleared her throat and said, "Are you serious? We can go?" The class tensed at the directness of the question, ready for it to provoke their teacher's notorious sarcasm.

But his razored wit remained in its scabbard; instead, he said, "Yes, Ashley, I'm serious. If you want to leave, you may."

Another student raised his hand. "What happens if we stay?"

"You'll have to wait to find out."

In the end, slightly less than half the class accepted the offer. Once the door had closed on the last student's departure, Mr Haringa closed the watch and returned it to its pocket. "Aidan," he said, "would you get the lights?"

For an instant the classroom was plunged into darkness. Someone laughed nervously. There was a click, and a series of lights sprang on around the room's perimeter. Positioned at the base of the walls, each cast upward a crimson light whose long oval shape suggested a window. A trick of their placement made the lights appear to hover ever so slightly in front of the painted brick. A couple of the students wondered when Mr Haringa had been in to set up so elaborate a display. They had watched him walk to his car yesterday afternoon, and they had seen him exiting it this morning. Not to mention the teacher had not impressed them as especially proficient in technology. Perhaps another faculty member had helped him? Mr Baillie, maybe?

Despite the fabric enveloping it, the pocket watch was louder in the crimson space, every tick opening into a tock. Yet when Mr Haringa spoke, his voice, though low, was clear. "You will recall," he said, "that, following his trip up what was then the Congo River, Joseph Conrad became ill. As does Marlow, yes. Unlike Marlow, Conrad went to a spa in Switzerland the year after his trip, to continue his recovery. He was suffering from a variety of complaints, including gout, which likely was unrelated to his time on the Congo, recurrent malaria, which likely was related to his months on the river, and pain in his right arm, which may or may not have been connected to his recent activities. Oh, and there was something wrong with his hands too, a strange swelling. To put it mildly, he was not in good shape.

"The spa he went to overlooked a mountain lake. A small steamboat, not unlike the one Conrad had captained on the Congo, ferried passengers to and from the spa to a modest town on the opposite shore. From his chair on the spa's front porch, Conrad could watch it chug across the lake's smooth blue surface. He found the sight simultaneously comforting and unnerving. Eventually, once he was feeling well enough, he left his chair, ventured down to the landing, and bought a ticket for the crossing. When the boat reached the town, he did not disembark; instead, he remained on board as the vessel took on a fresh load of passengers and set off for the spa. At the dock, he stepped off and made his way up to the spa.

“Conrad repeated this trip the next day, and the one after that, and every day thereafter for a week and a half. Finally, the steamboat’s captain introduced himself to him. His name was Heuvelt. He was from Amsterdam, originally, had commanded a merchant vessel in the Dutch East Indies for twenty years before retiring to the Swiss mountains, where he had established the steamboat service and was now as busy as he had ever been. He was approximately ten, fifteen years older than Conrad, late forties to early fifties. In a letter Conrad described him as weather-beaten to handsomeness. The two of them had a pleasant exchange. Conrad complimented Heuvelt on his vessel. Heuvelt invited him to try the wheel. Conrad declined, politely, but he and Heuvelt continued their conversation over the course of their next several visits, trading stories of their respective ocean voyages. According to everyone who knew him, Conrad was an accomplished raconteur, and apparently Heuvelt was reasonably gifted as well. Their daily meetings, Conrad wrote, did as much to restore him to well-being as any of the spa’s therapies. Eventually, he accepted Heuvelt’s offer to steer the boat, to the irritation of the young local whose job it was. Heuvelt was impressed with Conrad’s handling of the boat, and soon this became part of their daily routine. Conrad would board the steamboat, assume the wheel, and he and Heuvelt would converse while he guided the boat back and forth across the lake.

“After another couple of weeks, Heuvelt asked Conrad if he would be interested in joining him on board that evening, around sunset. There was something he wished to show Conrad, a peculiarity of the lake Heuvelt thought he would find of interest. Conrad agreed, and a few hours later was waiting alone on the landing as the steamboat pulled up to it. To his surprise, Heuvelt had the wheel, his young man nowhere to be found. ‘This is not for him,’ Heuvelt said, which sounds more odd, and even ominous, to us than it did to Conrad: ship captains are notorious for keeping secrets from their crew, no matter that the crew consists of a single man. Whatever their destination, Conrad understood Heuvelt was trusting him to keep it to himself.

“Heuvelt turned the boat toward the other end of the lake, which was hemmed in by steep mountains. About halfway to their destination, the sun set, leaving in its wake a crimson sky. The water caught the light, and it was

as if, Conrad wrote, they were steaming across a tide of blood, beneath a bloody firmament."

For an instant, a handful of students had the impression that the light saturating the classroom was in motion, as if they were seated on the steamboat with the writer and his friend. The tick-tock of Mr Haringa's pocket watch echoed like an enormous grandfather clock. The students shook their heads and returned their attentions to the teacher. A couple of them noticed that, despite the red filter laid over everything, Mr Haringa's waistcoat remained visible as its own distinct shade of the colour, but did not know what, if any, significance to ascribe to this.

His words still audible through the pocket watch's seesawing progress (perhaps he was wearing a microphone?), Mr Haringa proceeded: "With the sun setting, the mountains ahead grew shadowed. As the boat drew closer to them, Conrad saw that what he had taken for a recess among the peaks was in fact a steep valley, through which a surprisingly wide river rushed into the lake. Heuvelt turned the wheel to bring the prow in line with the river, and started them up it. To either side, thick walls rose, reducing the sky to a single red strip. There was a light on the boat, but Heuvelt made no move toward it. Conrad wondered if the man was attempting to impress him. If so, he was succeeding. While the river was sufficiently broad to admit the steamboat's passage, rocks and clusters of rocks pushed up through its current every few yards, requiring a skill at navigation Conrad did not think he would have been able to summon. He assumed Heuvelt was steering them toward another lake, because he could see no way for the boat to turn around in the river, but he did not want to distract Heuvelt from his task by asking him to verify his assumption.

"They rounded a bend in the river, and there in front of them a great tree stood in the midst of the water. Easily a hundred feet high, a third that in girth, it was like no tree Conrad had seen anywhere on his travels, which, as you know, had been considerable. Deep grooves ran up its bark, clumps of moss and small plants filling the channels. Pale lichen tattooed the tops of the ridges. High overhead, thick branches formed a crown like a vast umbrella, from which a network of vines hung in loops and lines. To show him such a thing might well have been Heuvelt's intent, but the steamboat showed no signs of stopping, so Conrad assumed there was more to come.

In order to circumvent the enormous obstacle, Heuvelt had to steer perilously close to its vast trunk, an arm's length away, less, and this close, Conrad could feel the tree's age. This was an ancient of its kind; when the Romans were laying roads across their empire, the tree must already have stood proud. Conrad stretched out a hand to touch the hide of so venerable a being, only to be warned off completing the act by a shake of Heuvelt's head.

"On the other side of the tree, the river spread out dramatically. Dozens of trees, each the same species and dimensions as the one they had passed, reared from the water, a flooded forest. In the twilight the trees reminded Conrad of great beasts, a herd of prehistoric animals gathered in the water to relieve the heat of the day. It was an astonishing sight, which had not been so much as hinted at during Conrad's time at the spa. This strained belief. Surely, he thought, a location as remarkable as the one into which the steamboat was sailing should be the pride of its location, should it not?"

Within each of the red lights around the classroom, a darker form appeared, a thick column suggestive of the trunk of a tree, viewed from a distance. While Mr Haringa's pocket watch counted its time, the shapes to the class's left became larger, the light on that side dimmer, as if the students were sailing this way. A handful of them felt the floor shift under the soles of their shoes, rising and falling as it would were they on the deck of a boat pushing up a river.

Although he had not changed his position in front of his desk, Mr Haringa's voice sounded closer; eyes closed, each student might have believed their teacher was seated beside them. As he continued with his narrative, the shadowy forms bisecting the rest of the red lights expanded, until it seemed the immense trees of his story surrounded the class. He said, "Employing signposts Conrad could not identify, Heuvelt sailed a winding course through the forest. Although he considered himself possessed of a superior sense of direction, Conrad soon lost track of which way they were travelling. Thinking he would regain his bearings by checking the stars already visible overhead, he leaned out from under the boat's roof. But he recognized none of the constellations burning in the sky from which the last traces of red had yet to vanish. This was impossible, of course, and he wondered if the crowns of the trees spreading between him and the stars

were in some way distorting his view, which was not much more likely, but preferable to the other explanations available. He retreated beneath the roof and saw Heuvelt watching him, the expression on the man's face an indication that he knew and had shared Conrad's observation. Such confirmation was almost too much to bear, Conrad later wrote; rather than acknowledge it, he asked Heuvelt if their destination had a name.

"In reply Heuvelt said, '*Haak*.' During his years at sea, Conrad had picked up a smattering of Dutch, but this word was unfamiliar to him. He started to ask for a translation when the steamboat chugged out of the trees into a wide pool in which sat the wreck of a great ship. It was a Spanish galleon, what you or I might imagine as an old-fashioned pirate ship, with three masts for its sails, a raised deck at its rear, and square windows perforating the sides for its cannons. Centuries had passed since such vessels had been in widespread use. The ship was tilted to the right, its wood blackened with age. Gaping holes in its left flank exposed its ribs. Its foremast had broken near the base and tipped into the water. The mainmast and mizzenmast were intact, the ragged remains of their sails and rigging draped from them like faded bunting. Amidst the tattered canvas, Conrad picked out shapes dangling from the masts, the corpses of a score of men, their flesh desiccated, their clothing rotted. They had been hanged, their hands tied behind their backs."

Now the darker columns within the red lights faded, to be replaced by a variety of shapes. At the front of the room, shadowy arcs suggested a ship's ribbing, while thick diagonal lines to either side of the students stood in for the tilted masts. Interspersed among these shapes were the silhouettes of men at one end of a heavy rope, their necks crooked. Only the lights at the back of the class were absent any form, and the glow they cast forward highlighted Mr Haringa in a hellish luminescence through which the waistcoat was visible in its own scarlet hue. The pocket watch had increased in volume to the point its TICK-TOCK shuddered the students' desks, and not a few of them wondered how much longer it would be until a teacher in one of the neighbouring rooms stuck their head in the door to request Mr Haringa turn down the noise.

His voice in each student's ear, Mr Haringa said, "Conrad was stunned. As if a flooded forest in the Swiss mountains was not fantastic enough, the

wreck of a huge, ocean-going ship in its midst defied explanation. There was no river large enough to have borne the galleon anywhere within fifty miles of the place. In his time at sea, Conrad had heard sailors relate glimpses of islands not on any maps, of vessels from centuries gone by. He was enough of a rationalist to ascribe the majority of these accounts to old and incomplete maps, to the confusion of distance and poor eyesight, but he was also enough of a sailor himself, to recognize that the immensity of the ocean held room for all manner of things. Although he had thought them far from the sea, it appeared the sea was not far from them. Combined with the unfamiliar constellations overhead, the remains of the ship indicated Heuvelt had taken them into one of those strange countries whose coastlines he had heard described.

"Heuvelt guided them around to the galleon's top side, keeping a wide distance between the steamboat and the masts with their tangle of sails. Throughout the trip so far, he had maintained a more or less constant speed, which he reduced as they circled the wreck. One eye on the ship, one on their course around it, he said, 'You have heard of the Armada, yes? The great fleet the Spanish king sent to invade England when Elizabeth was her queen. One hundred and thirty ships, it was said. It was defeated by the English Navy's ships, which were smaller and faster, and its tactics, which were superior. There is no one as ruthless as an Englishman. The Spanish captains chose to flee up the English and Scottish coast. Their enemies pursued them all the way. North of the Orkney Islands, the Spaniards turned west, intending to sail down the western side of Scotland into the Irish Sea. As they entered the open Atlantic, however, a ferocious storm greeted them. All along northwest Scotland and northeast Ireland, Spanish sailors were shipwrecked and came ashore. Many were killed by the populace. A few were given shelter by those Britons unfriendly to their queen.

"'There was one ship whose captain sought to escape the catastrophe of the Armada by sailing directly into the storm. He trusted his ability to navigate the wind and waves, and his crew to follow his commands. The English captains saw him heading toward the gale and allowed him to go, sure the Spaniard would not outlive his disastrous choice.

"'You know what it is like on a ship during a storm. The English were not wrong to let the Spanish vessel escape; they must have assumed the captain

was choosing to die in this fashion, rather than at the edges of their swords. They were not familiar with this commander, Diego de la Castille, who was new to the responsibility of a ship but was a gifted sailor and inspiring leader. Although Poseidon struggled mightily to bring the vessel and its crew to his watery halls, the captain outmanoeuvred him, and exited the other side of the storm.

"'Perhaps the old god had the last laugh, though, because when the wind quieted and the waves calmed, the ship was in a location not even the most seasoned hand recognized.'

"Conrad said, 'This place.'

"'Yes,' Heuvelt said, 'this place of great trees rising from the water, of a hundred scattered islets.' The steamboat had drawn opposite the tip of the mainmast. So distracted had Conrad become by Heuvelt's story that he did not notice the boy crouched on the end of the mast until he uttered an exultant, blood-curdling whoop and leapt toward them. Heuvelt had kept a good fifteen yards between their boat and the mast, but the child crossed the distance effortlessly. He landed on the steamboat's roof with a solid bang, scurried along it to the front of the boat, and dropped onto the deck before the men. Only Heuvelt's raised hand restrained Conrad from fleeing the short sword whose tip was suddenly pointed at his throat. Already Heuvelt was speaking, a patois of Spanish and another tongue Conrad recognized as Greek, but of an older, a much older, form. From what Conrad could understand, the man was urging calm to the child aiming his blade at the base of Conrad's neck. Panos, Heuvelt called the boy, who was perhaps ten or eleven, his long hair sun-bleached, his bronzed forearms and legs bare, latticed with white scars. He was wearing a scarlet coat, whose sleeves had been hacked off above the elbows, and whose ragged hem hung down to his calves; despite the antique style, Conrad saw its gold brocade and knew it at once as the garment of a ship's captain. Underneath the coat, the child was dressed in a tunic stitched together from large yellowed leaves. A worn strip of leather served him as a necklace for a steel hook, of the kind a man might substitute for a hand lost to violence. Conrad recalled the name Heuvelt had given this place and said, 'This is *Haak*?'

"Without pausing his speech to the boy, Heuvelt nodded. He was slowing the boat to a crawl. The child's weapon was wavering, but was still far too

close to Conrad's skin for him to feel free to move. Its tapered blade was notched, scratched, a record of many campaigns. The design reminded Conrad of illustrations he had seen in books on the ancient world. How strange it would be, he thought, to die on the point of such a sword now, at the end of the nineteenth century, with all its marvels and advances.

"As Heuvelt continued urging the boy to calm, he reached into his coat and withdrew from it a gold pocket watch. The child's eyes widened at the sight of it. Heuvelt wound the timepiece, then held it out. 'Go on,' he said, 'take it.' He'd brought it for the child. Quicker than Conrad could follow, the boy dropped the blade from his neck, leapt across the deck to Heuvelt, snatched the watch from his hand, and retreated with it to the prow. While the child hunched over the pocket watch, pressing it to one ear, then the other, Heuvelt said to Conrad, 'You have heard of the Roman captain who was sailing near Gibraltar when a loud voice declared, "The Great God Pan is dead." The captain sent word of this to the Emperor, who decreed three weeks of mourning for the passing of so important a deity. He was one of the old gods, Pan, foster-brother to Zeus. Now he is pictured as a dainty faun, but he was nothing of the kind. He was wild, savage, the cause of sudden panic in the forest. How could such a one die, eh? He did not. He withdrew into himself, made of his form a place in which he could retreat. Or perhaps that place was always what he had been, and the face he showed the other gods was a mask he put on for them. Either way, he left the society of gods and men. Who can say why? He remained undisturbed for a thousand years, more, long even as a god measures time.'

"Conrad was an experienced enough storyteller to recognize where Heuvelt's tale was headed. He said, 'Until the Spanish captain and his crew arrived to rouse Pan from his slumber.'

"'It is a dangerous thing,' Heuvelt said, 'to wake a god. Pan was both angry at the presumption and intrigued by the sight of these new men on a ship the like of which he had not seen before, dressed in strange clothing, and armed with shining weapons. His curiosity won out, and instead of appearing to them in his full glory, he chose the form of a child.'

"Conrad started. He had expected Heuvelt to declare the boy an orphaned descendant of the Spaniards. He said, 'Do you mean to say—'

“‘Of course,’ Heuvelt said, ‘Pan did not reveal his identity to the strangers. They took the child who stared at them from a rocky islet in this unfamiliar place as another castaway. They brought him on board their ship. A man of some learning, the captain knew enough classical Greek to converse with the boy. Over the next several days, he asked him how he had come to this location, if he knew its name, if he was alone. But the only information the child would offer was that he had been here many years. The captain concluded the child had been shipwrecked with his parents as an infant, and his father and mother subsequently died. Why the boy spoke antique Greek was a mystery, but already the men were teaching him Spanish, and the child was showing them locations of fresh water, and fruit, and game, so the captain decided to allow the mystery to remain unsolved. As for Pan, whom the men had named Pedro: after a millennium of solitude, he found he enjoyed the company of men much more than he would have anticipated.’

“‘Obviously,’ Conrad said, nodding at the wreck, the corpses dangling from its masts, ‘something changed.’

“‘There lived in the waters of this place a great beast, a crocodile, such as you may have seen sunning themselves on the banks of the Nile, though bigger by far than any of those. This was an old man, a grandfather croc, veteran of a hundred battles with his kind and others. Blind in one eye, scarred the length of his thick body, he was as cunning as he was ferocious. Their first days here, one of the sailors had sighted him, surveying the ship from a distance, and his size had amazed the crew. A few of the men suggested hunting him, but the captain forbade it, cautious of the risk of such an enterprise. As the monster gave them a wide berth, his command was easily followed.

“‘A few weeks after that, the crocodile capsized one of the ship’s boats and devoured three of the crew. It may be that the attack was unprovoked, that the beast had been studying the sailors, stalking them. Or it may be that the sailors had disobeyed their captain’s order and gone in search of grandfather croc. Well. Either way, they found him, much to their sorrow. The survivors fled to the ship, where they relayed the tale of their attack to their fellows. As you can imagine, the crew cried out for vengeance, a demand the captain gave in to. He led the hunt for the monster, and when the sailors found the crocodile, engaging him in a contest that lasted a full day, it was the Captain

who struck the killing blow, at the cost of his good right hand. The sailors towed the carcass to the ship, where they butchered it and made a feast of the meat, draping the hide over the bowsprit as a trophy.

"'Pan was not on the ship for any of this. He would leave the company of the Spaniards for a day or two to wander his home. He would visit the sirens who lived in a hole in the base of one of the great trees, and who sang of the days when they drew ships to break themselves on their rocky traps, so that they might dine on the flesh of drowned sailors with their needle teeth. Or he might watch the Cimmerians, who lived on a rocky island on the far side of the trees, and whose time was spent fighting the crab men who crept from the water to carry away the weak and infirm. Or he would seek out the islet in whose crevice was the living head of a demigod who had offended Pan and been torn asunder by a pair of boars as a consequence. Oh yes, this place is large and full of strange and wonderful things.

"'Wherever the god had been, when he returned to the ship and saw the crocodile's skin hanging from its front, his wrath was immediate. Grandfather croc had been sacred to Pan, and to kill him was a terrible trespass, no matter how many of the men he had eaten. Pan stood in the midst of the sailors feasting on the crocodile's meat and declared war on the vessel and its captain, pledging to kill them to the man. You can appreciate, the crew saw a child threatening them, and if a few were annoyed at his presumption, the majority was amused. The captain chided him for speaking to his friends so rudely, and offered him some of the wine he had uncorked for the celebration. Pan slapped the goblet away and fled the ship.

"'The next time the Spaniards saw the god, he was armed with the blade you have inspected so closely. As one of the ship's boats was returning from collecting fresh fruit, it passed beneath the limb of a great tree where Pan was waiting. He dropped into the middle of the boat and ran through the men at its oars. The rest scrambled for their weapons, but even confined to such a modest form, Pan was more than their equal. He ducked their swings, avoided their thrusts. He slashed this man's throat, opened that man's belly. Once the crew was dealt with, he threw the food they had gathered overboard and left.

“‘As it happened, though, one of the first men Pan stabbed was not dead, the sword having missed his heart by a hair’s breadth. Still grievously wounded, this sailor nonetheless was able to bring the boat and its cargo of corpses back to the ship, where he lived for enough time to describe Pan’s attack. The crew were outraged at the deaths of their mates, as was the captain, but he was as concerned at the loss of the fruit the men had been transporting.

“‘The following day he sent out two boats, one to carry what food could be found, the other to guard it. Before they had reached the islet that was their destination, the men sighted Pan curled in a hollow in one of the trees, apparently asleep. Thinking this a chance to avenge their fellows, they rowed toward him. As they drew closer, the Spaniards heard voices, women’s voices, singing a song of surpassing loveliness. They searched the trees, but saw no one. One of the men looked into the water and directed the others to do likewise. Floating below the surface were the sirens, their limbs wrapped in long trains of silk. Pan liked them to sing of his life as it had been, when he and his foster-brother, great Zeus, had spent their days roaming the beaches of Crete, peering into the pools the tide left, on their guard for Kronos’s spies. The approach of the boats distracted the sirens from their duty. Long years had passed since they had tasted the flesh of any man but the Cimmerians. From the shores of Crete, their song changed to the delights awaiting the sailors under the water. Wasting no time, one of the younger men leapt to join them. He was followed by all his fellows save one, an old hand mostly deaf from decades manning the cannons. To him, the sirens’ song was a distant, pleasant music. He was the one who would return to the ship to relate the fates of the others. He would describe the sirens darting around the men, keeping just out of reach. Like many sailors of the time, none of those who had pursued the sirens could swim; not that it would have made much difference in this case. Maybe they would not have drowned so quickly. That was bad, but what was worse was when the sirens began to feed. Their song ceased, and the old hand who had watched his mates die saw that their beautiful robes were in fact long fins growing from their arms and legs, and that their pretty mouths were full of sharp, sharp teeth. So frightened was the sailor that he forgot about Pan until he

was fleeing. Then he saw the god awake, on his hands and knees, leaning forward to watch the water grow cloudy with blood.

“‘If the captain grieved the loss of his men, and so soon after the deaths of the others, he regretted the loss of the second boat almost as much. He was aware, too, that for a second day the ship’s larder had not been replenished. The vessel had provisions enough for this not to be of immediate concern, but you know the importance of well-fed men, especially on a ship lost in a strange place.

“‘First, though, there were the sirens to be dealt with. An expedition to the spot was out of the question. The old sailor’s report of the creatures had terrified the men. The captain suggested borrowing a trick from Homer and stopping their ears, but the crew would have none of it. Rather than risk rebellion, the captain ordered the ship’s cannons loaded and trained on the sirens’ location. Three volleys the Spaniards fired at the creatures. Their cannonballs felled two of the great trees, and stripped limbs from and struck holes in ten more. While the smoke still rolled on the water, the captain and four of his bravest men stuffed their ears with rags and boarded the remaining boat, which they rowed toward the sirens quickly. Upon reaching the spot, they found two of the creatures floating dead, the limbs of a third between them. A fourth swam in a slow circle, right beneath the water’s surface, gravely wounded. The captain dispatched her with his sword, then had the men retrieve her body and those of her sisters. They towed the sirens’ remains to the ship, where the captain instructed the crew to hang them from the mainmast.

“‘Certain that an attack by Pan was forthcoming, flushed with his victory over the sirens, the captain prepared for battle. The armoury was opened, the cannons were loaded, watches were posted. On the ship’s forge, the smith crafted a hook to replace the captain’s lost hand. All of this for a boy, eh? Yes, the Spaniards did not know Pan’s true identity, but they had realized he was no normal child. His immunity to the sirens’ music marked him as a supernatural being himself. Many of the crew were sure he was a devil and this Hell. The superstitions of sailors are legendary, and the captain, who worried about Pan more than his station would allow him to admit, did not want the men’s fears to undermine the ship’s order. He pointed to grandfather croc’s hide, to the bodies of the sirens, and told the

crew that if this was Hell, then they would make the devils fear them. Brave words, and had Pan appeared at that moment, the sailors would have thrown themselves at him with all the ferocity they had reserved for the English.

"'During the days to come the ship was the model of discipline. The men did not see Pan, but they had no doubt he was preparing his assault. The days became a week. The lookouts saw nothing in the great trees but brightly coloured birds. One week became two. There was no hint of Pan. The crew grew restless. The captain wondered if the child had been struck by a cannonball and killed, but was reluctant to chance his remaining boat to investigate the speculation. With each passing day, the ship's provisions diminished, and this became as great a concern for the captain as Pan's skill with the sword. Hunger leads to desperation, desperation to mutiny, for sailors, at least. For those in command, desperation is brother to recklessness, and the arrival of one foretells the arrival of the other. As the second week of the ship's vigil tipped into the third, the captain called on his four best men and joined them in the boat. Together, they set out to look for Pan.

"'Their search took them to the place he had been seen last, the lair of the sirens. The Spaniards had blocked their ears, but there was no need: the spot was deserted. From that location, they rowed to every one Pan had showed them, from a rocky islet where grew a grove of lemon trees to a long sandbar whose grass fed a herd of goats. Nowhere was the god visible. They came within view of the rugged home of the Cimmerians, which Pan had cautioned them to avoid. Through his spyglass, the captain surveyed the island's huts, but could see neither the child nor the Cimmerians. A terrible suspicion seized him, which was borne out a moment later, when an explosion sounded from the ship's direction.

"'You can imagine, the men rowed with all the speed they could summon. When they reached the ship, they saw her canted to port, a column of thick smoke rising from the hole in her starboard side. A fierce fight was underway on the sloping deck between the sailors and a small army of men and women. They were bone white, these people, armoured in the shells of the crab men they had slain, which proved little match for the Spaniards' steel. But their weapons, spears with fire-hardened tips, axes with sharpened rock heads, were no less deadly when they found their mark, and

there were more, many, many more, of the Cimmerians than there were of the crew. Dancing across the bloody boards, Pan stabbed this man in the leg, cut the hamstrings of another, jabbed a third in the back. The air was full of the grunts and cries of the sailors, the cracks of their swords on the shell-armour, and the battle song of the Cimmerians, which is a low, ghostly thing.

"'Once the boat was within reach of the deck, the captain leapt onto it, his blade at the ready. A swordsman of no small repute, he cut a path to the spot where Pan was engaged in a duel with the first mate, who had succeeded in scoring his opponent's legs and forearms with the tip of his sword. Just as the captain reached them, Pan jumped over the mate's swing and drove his blade into the man's chest. Enraged, the captain lunged at the god, but the blood of his lieutenant betrayed him, causing his foot to slip and him to lose his balance. A kick from Pan sent him tumbling down the deck, into the water.

"'Unlike the crew, the captain could swim. He was hindered, though, by his fine coat, whose fabric drank the water thirstily, dragging him deeper. Clenching his sword between his teeth, he used his hand to pull the garment from him. He was almost free of it when the right sleeve caught on his hook. Try as he might, the captain could not extract his arm from the coat; nor was he able to loosen the straps securing the hook. What air remained in his lungs was almost spent. There was no choice for him but to haul the coat with him, as if he were pulling a drowning man to safety.

"'By the time he climbed onto the ship, the battle was done. The crew was dead or dying. They had acquitted themselves well against their attackers, but the Cimmerians had the advantage of overwhelming numbers and the assistance of a god. The captain found that deity's sword pointed at him, together with a dozen spears. However skilled he was with his own weapon, he was a realist who recognized defeat when it confronted him. He lowered his blade, reversed it, and offered it to Pan, telling him the ship was his.

"'If he was expecting his surrender to result in mercy, the captain was disappointed. Pan had sworn death to all the Spaniards, and a god will not break his oath. At his signal, the Cimmerians seized the captain's arms. A pair of them tore the coat from his hook, then used their stone knives to cut the bindings of the hook. They sliced away the captain's garments until he

stood naked. They forced him to the deck, and held him there by the elbows and knees while an old woman pressed a sharpened shell to his thigh and began the laborious work of removing his skin.

"'She was skilled at her work, but the process took the rest of the afternoon. The captain struggled not to cry out, to endure his torture with dignity, but who can maintain his resolve when his skin is being peeled from the muscle? The captain screamed, and once he had done so, continued to, until his throat was as bloody as the strips of his flesh spread out to either side of him. Occasionally, the old woman would pause to exchange one shell for another, and the captain would survey the ruination fallen upon his vessel. The Cimmerians had taken the crew's weapons and select items of their clothing, scarves, belts, and boots. Already, they had cut down the sirens' remains and were hanging Spanish corpses in their place. Grandfather croc's hide had been gathered from the bowsprit and folded into a mat, which Pan sat upon as he watched the Cimmerian woman part the captain's skin from him. He had donned the captain's fine coat, waterlogged as it was, and was holding the hook, turning it over in his hands as if it were a new, fascinating toy. Every so often, he would raise his right hand, his index finger curved in imitation of the metal question mark, and grin.

"'As the day was coming to an end, the old woman completed the last of her task, the careful work of separating the Captain from his face. He had not died, which is astonishing, nor had he gone mad, which is no less amazing. Pan stood from his crocodile mat and approached him. In his right hand, he gripped the captain's hook. He knelt beside the man and uttered words the captain did not understand. He placed the point of the hook below the captain's breastbone and dug it into him. With no great speed, the god dragged the hook past the man's navel. Leaving it stuck there, Pan released the hook and plunged his hand into the captain's chest, up under the ribs to where the man's heart galloped. The god took hold of the slippery organ and wrenched it from its place. This must have killed the captain instantly, but if any spark of consciousness flickered behind his eyes, he would have seen Pan slide his heart from him, raise it to his mouth, and bite into it.'"

Mr Haringa paused. The assortment of dark shapes within the crimson lights faded, brightening the room. The pocket watch dropped in volume, its tick-tock merely loud. When the teacher spoke, his voice no longer seemed to nestle in each student's ear. He said, "In his years at sea, Conrad had heard tales that were no less fantastical than this one. He had taken them with enough salt to flavour his meals for the remainder of his life. His inclination was to do the same with the narrative Heuvelt had unfolded, admire its construction though he might. The very location in which Heuvelt delivered it, however, argued for its veracity with brute simplicity. All the same, Conrad found it difficult to accept that the boy who had seated himself at the front of the boat, where he had succeeded in prying open the pocket watch and was studying its hands, was the avatar of a god. He expressed his doubt to Heuvelt, who said, 'You know the story of Tantalus? The king who served his son as a meal for the gods? Why, eh? Some of the poets say he was inspired by piety, others by blasphemy. It does not matter. What matters is that one of the gods, Demeter, ate the boy's shoulder before Zeus understood what was on the table in front of them. A god may not taste the flesh of man or woman. To do so confuses their natures. Zeus forced Demeter to vomit the portion she had eaten, and he hurled Tantalus into Tartarus, where Hades was happy to devise a suitable torment for his presumption. Demeter had been duped, but Pan sank his teeth into the captain's heart with full awareness of what he was doing. Nor did he stop after the organ was a bloody smear on his lips. He dined on the captain's liver and tongue and used the hook to crack the skull to allow him to sample the brain. Sated, he fell into a deep slumber beside the remains of Diego de la Castille, captain in the Navy of his majesty, Phillip II of Spain.

"'In the days after, Pan changed. The Cimmerians had departed the ship once the god was asleep, taking with them the captain's skin, whose pieces they would tan and stitch into a pouch to carry their infants. Alone, Pan roamed the ship, dressed still in the captain's scarlet coat. He loosened the hook from its collar, cut a strip of leather from a crew member's belt, and fashioned a necklace for himself. The captain's remains he propped against the mainmast and sat beside, engaging in long, one-sided conversations with the corpse. He was becoming split from himself, you see, this'—Heuvelt gestured at the child—'separated from this.' He swept his hand to

encompass their surroundings. ‘The Cimmerians, who had faithfully followed the god into a battle that had winnowed their numbers by a third, grew to fear the sight of him rowing toward them in the ship’s remaining boat, a strange tune, half-hymn, half-sea shanty on his lips. He was as likely to charge them with his sword out, hacking at any whose misfortune it was to be within reach of its edge, as he was to sit down to a meal with their elders. The sirens, too, learned to flee his approach, after he lured one of them to the ship, caught her in a trap made from its sails, and dragged her onto the deck. There, he lashed her beside the captain’s corpse and commanded her to sing for him. But the words that once had pleased the god now tormented him, and in a rage, he slew the siren. He loaded the captain’s body into the stern of the boat and roamed the islets of this place. He chased the herd of goats in and out of the water until they were exhausted and drowned. He hunted the flocks of bright birds roosting in the trees and decorated his locks with bloody clumps of their feathers. He piled stones on top of the rock opening in which he had tucked the head of the dismembered demigod, entombing him.

“‘The transformation that overtook Pan’s form as man affected his form as nature, as well. In days gone by, the routes here were few. A fierce storm might permit access, as might the proper sacrifices, offered in locations once sacred to the god. Now the place floated loose in space. Its trees would be visible off the coast of Sumatra or in a valley in the Pyrenees. Rarely were those who ventured into the strange forest seen again, and the few who did return told of their pursuit by a devil in a red coat rowing a boat with a corpse for its crew.’

“‘And you,’ Conrad said. ‘How did you come here?’

“‘An accident,’ Heuvelt said. ‘The boiler had been giving me trouble, to the point of almost stranding me in the middle of the lake with a full load of passengers. Not very good for business. Compared to the trials I had faced on the open sea, it was modest, but a difficulty will grow to fit as much room as there is for it. I laboured over the boiler until I was sure I had addressed the fault, and then took the boat out. I should have stayed in. There was a heavy fog on the water. But so obsessed had I become with the problem that I could not wait to test its solution. I flattered myself that my skill at the wheel was more than sufficient to keep me from harm.

“‘Harm, I avoided, but I stumbled into this place, instead. You will appreciate my wonder and my confusion. I spied our young friend balanced on the ship’s bowsprit, and when he challenged me, I knew enough of Greek and enough of Spanish to speak with him. Of course, I took him for an orphan (which from a certain point of view he was, abandoned by himself). Only later did I understand the peril I had been in. Our first exchange, halting as it was, gave me the sense that there was more to this boy than was apparent to my eye. When I left, I offered to take him with me, but he refused. For the gift of my conversation, though, Pan permitted me to depart unharmed.

“‘Thereafter, I might have avoided the western end of the lake. Whether I judged my experience a waking dream or a visit to fairyland, I might have decided not to repeat it. As you can see, I abandoned prudence in favour of the swiftest return I could manage. I half-expected the way to be closed: I had made inquiries of several of my passengers the next day, and no one expressed any knowledge of strange rivers amongst the mountains. Yet when I searched for it that night, the passage was open. More, my young friend was eager to see me. Since then, I have visited whenever the opportunity has presented itself. I have learned my way around the tongue Pan and the Spaniards cobbled together. As I have done so, I have had his story, a piece at a time, in no order. The majority of these fragments, I have assembled into the tale you have heard; though there remain incidents whose relation to the whole I have yet to establish.

“‘From the beginning, I had the conviction I must save this child, I must rescue him from this place. My own son died of a fever shortly after he learned to walk, while I was away at sea. I understood the influence this sad event exerted on my sentiments, but the awareness did nothing to diminish them. Each time I voyaged here, I brought candy, cakes, toys, whatever I guessed might tempt the boy away. After I understood what he was—as much as any man could—I continued my efforts to bring him with me. For if it is accounted a good deed to help a child out of misfortune, what would it mean to come to the assistance of a god?

“‘Only the timepiece,’ Heuvelt nodded at it, ‘has continued to interest him. Every time I remove it from my pocket, it is as if he sees it anew. It fascinates him. Occasionally, I believe it frightens him. I have told him that,

should he come with me, I will make a gift of it to him. The lure of the watch is strong, but not yet greater than the fear of venturing forth from his home. I think he will choose to accompany me into the world of men. It is why I have been able to travel the waters here so often. For the trespass he committed against his divinity, he must atone.'

"'What form would such a thing take?' Conrad said.

"'I do not know,' Heuvelt said. 'Perhaps he would live as a mortal, resolve the conflict in his being by walking the path we tread all the way down to the grave. Or perhaps he would require more than a single lifespan. How long is needed for a god to atone to himself? He might spend centuries on the effort.'

"There was a clatter from the front of the steamboat. Conrad glanced in that direction to see the child leap onto the railing and from there up to the roof. Another astonishing jump carried him from the boat to the tip of the ship's mainmast, which he caught one-handed and used to swing onto the mast. While he was running down the spar to the ship, Heuvelt brought the boat's speed up and turned the wheel in the direction of home. The child had left the watch on the deck; Conrad retrieved it and handed it to Heuvelt, who tucked it into his coat with a sigh. 'The next visit,' he said, 'or the one after that, perhaps.'

"Although Conrad remained at the Swiss spa another two weeks, and continued to take the ferry every day, he and Heuvelt did not discuss their voyage to the wrecked galleon and their encounter with the figure Heuvelt claimed was a god gone mad. He understood that the man had given him a gift, shared with him a secret mysterious and profound. But there was too much to say about all of it for him to know where or how to begin, and as Heuvelt did not broach the topic, Conrad chose to follow his example. Heuvelt did not invite him on a second expedition.

"Nor would Conrad speak or write of the trip until the last years of his life, when he spent fifteen pages of a notebook detailing it, more or less as I've related it to you. By then he had been contacted by a number of critics, each of whom wanted to know about the sources of his fiction. He'd never made any secret of his life on the sea, but many of the letters he received sought to connect his biography to his writing in a way that stripped the art from it.

He grumbled to his friends, but he answered the inquiries. He also recorded his experience in the Swiss mountains. Once he was finished, he turned to a fresh page and listed the titles and dates of a handful of narratives: ‘The Great God Pan’ (1890), ‘The Story of a Panic’ (1902), *The Little White Bird* (1902), *The Wind in the Willows* (1908), *Peter and Wendy* (1911). Under these, he wrote, ‘A coincidence, or a sign Heuvelt at last succeeded in his quest, and delivered the god to his long exile?’ Not long after writing these words, Conrad died.

“In the interest of scholarly integrity, I should add that the majority of Conrad scholars consider the notebook story a bizarre forgery. Even those few who accept it as Conrad’s work dismiss it as a five-finger exercise. It’s an understandable response. How could such a tale be anything other than pure invention?”

The pocket watch stopped. With a click, the crimson lights switched off, flooding the classroom with darkness. Something vast seemed to crowd the space with the students. Mr Haringa’s voice said, “Aidan, would you get the lights?”

After the dark (which took a fraction of a second too long to disperse), the fluorescent lights were harsh, prompting most of the students to turn their heads aside, or lift their hands against it. By the time their eyes had adjusted, Mr Haringa was behind his desk, shuffling through the folders in which he kept his selection of relevant newspaper clippings. Without looking up, he said, “All right, people, you’re free to go. Thank you for indulging me. Don’t forget, next class we’re starting Yeats’s ‘Sailing to Byzantium’. Anyone who feels particularly ambitious can take a look at ‘Byzantium’, which is a different poem.”

Still half in a daze, the students rose from their desks and headed for the door, some shaking their heads, some mumbling, “What *was* that?” A pair of students, the girls who competed for the highest grades in the class, paused in front of the teacher’s desk. One cleared her throat; the other said, “Mr Haringa?”

“Yes?” Mr Haringa said.

“We were wondering: what do you think happened? To Pan? What did the Dutch guy do with him?”

Mr Haringa straightened in his chair, crossing his arms over his scarlet waistcoat. “What do you think?”

“We don’t know.”

“You have no idea whatsoever?”

“Can you just tell us, please? We have to get to Pre-Calc.”

“All right,” Mr Haringa said. “We know Heuvelt was using the watch to lure Pan out of his world and into ours. The question is, once you have him here, how do you keep him here? Or—that’s not it, exactly. It’s more a matter of, how do you accommodate him to this place, with all its strangeness? I’d say the answer lies in language, story, poetry, song. He knew some Spanish, so you might begin by reading him *Don Quixote*, a little bit at a time. As his fluency improved, you could introduce him to Lope de Vega, who wrote a long poem about the Spanish Armada. Yes, the same one the galleon had been part of. Maybe you would move on to Bécquer, his *Rimas y legendas*. Then—you get the idea. You teach him other languages: French, Italian, Dutch, English. You introduce him to Racine, Boccaccio, van den Vondel, Shakespeare. You bind him to our world with narrative, loop figures of speech around him, weight him with allusions. Does this answer your questions?”

“Kind of.”

“Kind of?”

“Didn’t you say Pan would have to atone for eating the captain?”

“Ah.” Mr Haringa paused. “To be honest, I’ve wondered that myself. I have no idea. I’m not sure how the god would figure out what he had to do, especially if he was cut off from himself, from that fullness of being he had known before his trespass. I can picture him telling and retelling the story of that event in an effort to discover whether the answer lay somewhere in its details. In this case, your guess is just about as good as mine.”

“Um, okay. Thank you.”

“Yeah, thanks, Mr H. See you tomorrow.”

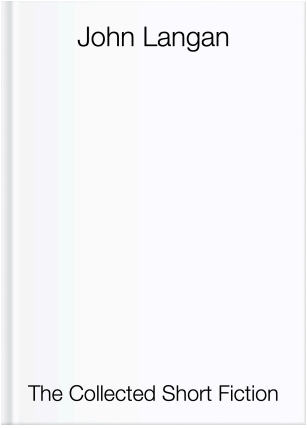
After the class, Mr Haringa had a free period. Once the hallway outside his room had grown quiet, he crossed to the door and turned the lock. Returning to his desk, he unbuttoned the scarlet waistcoat and shrugged it

from his shoulders, draping it on the back of his chair. He opened the white dress shirt underneath down to his navel. A raised white scar ran up the centre of his breastbone. His eyes focused on some distant internal image, Mr Haringa traced the ridge with the fingers of his right hand. Slowly, he dug his fingertips into the scar, grimacing as the toughened flesh resisted the tear of his nails. As his skin parted, he brought up his left hand to widen the opening. His sternum cracked and rustled. There was surprisingly little blood.

The hook was slippery in Mr Haringa's grasp. Exhaling sharply, he slid it from his chest. He swayed, gripping the chair with his left hand to steady himself. Tears flooded his vision; he blinked them away, raising the hook to view. Stained and discoloured with blood and age, the metal reflected Mr Haringa's features imperfectly. The point of the implement had retained its sharpness. Mr Haringa brought the hook to his mouth and pressed its tip into his lower lip. He remembered the bitter taste of the captain's heart, its chewiness.

> *Si les dieux ne font rien d'inconvenant, c'est alors qu'ils ne sont plus dieux du tout*
> —Mallarmé

Pilgrimage / Home Invasion



In an interview the other week, I said that, for horror writers and fans, Halloween is our Christmas. In the spirit of giving, then, here a couple of short-short stories. I wrote them the other week for my high school English classes, which were participating in a creative writing contest inspired by the *Stranger Things* series. The students were presented with a list of eight story prompts; they had to choose one and use it in the writing of a story under one hundred words. The aim was for something in a kind of *Twilight Zone*-y mode. At the behest of my students, I tried my hand at a couple, which turned out less Rod Serling and more weird Raymond Carver.

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Pilgrimage

"Keep Out: Danger!" the sign on the electric fence read. No one knew what the compound had contained, what had required both the written warning and the charge still capable of knocking you to the ground. As we did every day, we shuffled to the fence and stood there, waiting. Some said God lived in the blocky cement building visible through the fence's links; some approached the fence looking for judgment, salvation. When the rifle cracked and the bullets took their daily toll, spraying bone and brains from our skulls, it was difficult to say which fate had found us.

Home Invasion

The noise was coming from the basement. Usually, they break in through the doors and windows, but they are inventive. It was my turn to check. You have to be prompt: once they're inside, they'll overrun a place in no time at all. I wrapped my face and hands, put on the sunglasses, and took the pistol. There were four. They'd wriggled in through a window I would have guessed too small for them. From the stairs, I shot them before they

managed to get their stakes out. Lead bullets: cheap and effective. Ironically, the sunlight helped me see them.

El Charro

Recently, I conducted an interview with the excellent folks over at Circulo Lovecraftiano, at the end of which, they gave me a prompt and asked me to write a short short story using it. As usual, what I wrote ran considerably longer than what I'm guessing they had in mind. I thought I'd share the story here.

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He woke to darkness and the ammoniac odor of disinfectant, which failed to conceal the mingled reek of piss, shit, and blood. The right side of his jaw throbbed; when he eased his tongue towards the teeth there, fireworks of pain signaled that several, maybe all, were broken. He had a confused memory of something swinging toward his face—a chair? *How?* He had been at dinner with Phoenix and the others at the little *fondita*, discussing Fuentes and then…

Langan rolled over, the motion filling his jaw with hurt. He exhaled sharply, his breath torturing shattered molars. Tears wet his cheeks, blurred the dim scene in front of him. He wiped his eyes with the back of his hand. On the floor next to his bunk lay a figure whose white shirt seemed to glow in the dark. A black pool spread around its head in a liquid halo. *Phoenix?* Although doing so made the entire right side of his head sing with pain, his vision flare white, he pushed himself to sitting, gripping the edge of the bunk with both hands to keep himself from tipping off it.

Two of the four walls around him were rows of metal bars. He was in a jail cell—a first, in this country or any other. The realization was as shocking as the injury to his face, maybe more so. Based on the lack of light to which his eyes were still adjusting, morning was a long distance away. What had happened? With the exception of an elderly couple nearer its front, he, Phoenix, and the rest of the reading group had had the restaurant to themselves. The talk had been lively, mixed with laughter, the food delicious. Though there had been—at one point, they had heard something in the kitchen, a single sound midway between a laugh and a sob. Their

conversation (What about *Vlad*, anyway?) had paused, then, when the utterance was not repeated, resumed. And that was it, until whatever had preceded the chair swinging toward—and presumably, into—his head.

From the floor, the figure in the white shirt groaned, the complaint oddly muffled, as if its mouth were full of half-chewed food. Squinting, Langan leaned forward. The darkness seemed granular, as if it were particles hanging in the air. It was a man—it was Phoenix. With the recognition came awareness that there was something wrong with the lower part of his face, something terribly wrong. His mouth and jaw looked misshapen, as if they had been crushed in a powerful grip. Black liquid—blood shone thickly on them. This was the reason his moan sounded stifled: it had to make its way out through the wreckage of his palate, teeth, tongue, and lips.

Fear clear, pure, and sharp washed through Langan. *Oh shit oh shit oh shit*. Whatever he and Phoenix had been caught up in (where were the others?) it was bad. Why had Phoenix been brought in here and left in this condition? Another wet groan escaped him. Should Langan call for help? The corridors outside the cell appeared empty.

To his left, the cell's two solid walls met in a corner whose darkness seemed denser, as if the particles of blackness were concentrated there. The form that emerged from it crept towards Phoenix with hands and feet on the floor, in a crab walk that was silent and oddly graceful. Its head was enormous, saucer-shaped, vastly out of proportion to the rest of its spindly body. Langan started, scrambled to the other side of his bunk, striking the wall to which it was anchored, his head flashing with pain. He pressed against the plaster, trying to force himself into it, away from the thing that circled to the other side of Phoenix and lowered its oversized head to his face. There was a lapping sound, like a dog at its water dish. Phoenix moaned, the complaint leaping several octaves to a scream as the lapping was replaced by a series of cracks. Langan's feet scrambled against the bunk's nominal blanket, pushing it onto the floor with a thump. The cracking stopped; Phoenix's screaming dropped to a groan. *Oh shit oh shit*. The great saucer of a head raised to consider Langan, whose eyes were bulging from the sockets, whose heart was beating so fast his pulse had become a single, panicked thrum.

The creature coughed, a sound like an old man clearing his throat. "*Gringo*," it said in a high, reedy voice, "you're awake. Give me ten pesos."

"What?"

Thin, anemic laughter burst from the creature, and as it shook at its joke, Langan saw that it was a man; albeit, a skinny one, skin and bones with an emphasis on the bones. What he had taken for its flattened head was an enormous hat, a black sombrero. The man was dressed in a black jacket and black jeans, the jacket embroidered in silver designs: the costume of the *charro*; although he was barefoot. The brim of the sombrero obscured the top half of his face. His mouth was draped by a long, dense mustache that gleamed wetly: *With Phoenix's blood*, Langan realized, the horror that had ebbed as he saw he was facing a man surging again. *What is this?*

"They tell me you were speaking about *el conde*," the man said.

"About…? I'm sorry: my Spanish is not very good."

"The count," the man said.

"Who…?"

"The son of the dragon," the man said, "Vlad Tepes."

Fuentes's novel. "Oh," Langan said. "Yes, we were. I mean, we were discussing a book. By a Mexican writer, Carlos Fuentes. Maybe you know him, his work?"

"I do not read," the man said.

"Oh."

"What were you saying about this book?"

"It's a sequel to *Dracula*—by Bram Stoker. About the vampire. It was the last book Fuentes wrote, before his death. In it, Dracula—Vlad moves to Mexico."

"Ah." With the thumb and index finger of his right hand, the man reached into Phoenix's mouth. Phoenix gagged, screamed. There was a snap. When the man's fingers reappeared, they were holding something small and white—a molar. He popped it in his mouth. The tooth rattled against his teeth as he sucked it. Around the molar, he said, "And what does the book say he does after he moves?"

Through trembling lips, Langan said, “He takes away the narrator’s family. Except, the narrator already lost them. He was too self-involved, too blind to see what was happening in front of him.”

“Blind.” Something in the way the man said the word raised the hairs on the back of Langan’s neck, stippled his flesh with goosebumps. Without knowing the reason why, he understood that he had just walked onto ice so thin his next breath might drop him to the black water below. But he could not stop talking, had in the extremity of his fear entered what his wife referred to as full-professor mode. “Yes,” he said. “Blindness is one of the book’s central motifs. I’m not sure if Fuentes had bats in mind—because of their association with vampires. Obviously. The narrator fails to register all manner of important details. Dracula himself wears dark glasses, behind which, his eyes are missing.”

“Are they?” the man said, and Langan heard the ice beneath his feet creaking.

“Yes.”

“How do you think the writer, this…Fuentes, arrived at such a detail?”

Before Langan could open his mouth to answer, the man had leapt the distance separating them. Langan cried out, raised his hands in front of him. The man’s face pressed against Langan’s palms, his mustache a wire brush. The copper smell of blood filled Langan’s nostrils, with underneath it, a worse odor, that of meat gone rotten and riddled with maggots. Through the bars of his fingers, Langan saw the hollowed sockets where the *charro*’s eyes had been. *Oh*, he thought, *oh no*.

With a crunch, the man bit down on Phoenix’s molar. “When I was a young man, I took part in the *charreada*. You know this word? The rodeo, I think you call it. My specialty was the *Jineto de Toro*, riding the bull. I was not very good. The bull threw me, and then he did a dance on me. My bones…” The man snapped his fingers one two three four five six, a rapid-fire succession of pops. “Sadly, I lived. But I could no longer walk. I had no education, no family to take me in. So, I became a beggar. I sat outside churches and asked for money,” the man lifted his right hand, palm cupped, “*¿puedes darme dinero por favor?* I might have starved. A tightfisted bunch, the devout. My luck was better with the tourists. ‘*Gringo*,’ I would

say, ‘give me ten pesos,’ and they would, sometimes even more. I could not believe it. On a good day, I did all right for myself. I would pick a place near one of the better hotels and be there before the sun was up. That was how *el conde* found me. He was on his way back to his room after a night out. I thought he looked drunk. Drunk tourists could be very generous. I asked him for ten pesos. He walked past me, then he stopped, turned around, and came towards me. ‘How would you like something much better than ten pesos?’ he said, ‘Better than one hundred, one thousand pesos?’ What else was I going to say but, ‘Yes, of course.’ I thought I might have to suck his cock, maybe let him fuck me, but I had done worse for less. I was wrong. With one hand, he grabbed my jacket and lifted me up into the air. With the fingers of his other hand,” the man held up his index and middle fingers, “he scooped my right eye from my head and licked it from his fingers. I screamed, oh how I screamed. He took my left eye, and then, in the dark…he made me into *this*.”

Absurdly, Langan said, “I’m sorry. I’m so, so sorry.”

The man tilted his head. “*Gracias.* Even for one such as me, there are good manners, eh?” He sprang off the bunk, back into the corner he had emerged from. Although his vision had adjusted to the lack of light, Langan could no longer see the *charro*. It was as if he had been absorbed by the blackness there. “In time,” his voice continued, “I found my way here. This jail has not been used in many years. There has been talk of replacing it, knocking it down and building something else in its place, but the talk has remained talk. For the moment, it belongs to the beggars. It *belonged* to the beggars: now it belongs to me.

“*El conde* has not passed this way since the night we met. I have watched for him. Not literally, of course, but in other ways. There is much the two of us have to…discuss. When news reached my ears of a group of diners discussing Vlad Tepes, I thought he had made his return. Apparently, I misunderstood.”

“We were just talking about a book.”

“Yes.”

“Will you let my friend and me go?”

“Does the spider release the flies from his web? After all, food is food.”

“But this was a mistake, you said so yourself.”

“I have made many mistakes.”

“Maybe there’s something I could give you?”

“You will.”

“That’s…” Before he could think better of it, Langan jammed his fingers into his mouth. The teeth in his upper and lower gums were a splintered line whose members shifted as his fingers prodded them, filling his head with pain bright as sunrise. At the back of his lower jaw, he found a molar reasonably whole and reasonably loose. He pinched it at the gumline and pulled. The pain was a furnace white hot. With a rip he felt in his throat, the tooth tore from his jaw. He dropped the molar in his other hand, spat the blood that spilled from the socket onto the floor, and thrust his fingers back into his mouth. The next tooth up was already broken in the gum, and slick with the fresh blood, but he was able to wrench it free, too. Tears poured down his face; snot streamed over his lip. He could feel the sounds he was making vibrating his throat, but could not hear them over the roaring of his blood in his ears. He tried for a third tooth, but his fingers kept sliding off its bloody enamel. Finally, he said, “Here,” and flung the teeth to the floor.

The *charro* hissed, the train of sibilance rushing over the floor, up the walls, across the ceiling. Langan flinched. For a moment, the sound surrounded him. When at last the *charro* spoke, it was with such anger, he seemed to be choking: “Freely given?”

“What do you think?” Langan spat blood.

“*Freely given?*”

“Yes,” Langan said, “yes, freely given.”

A pause then, with dull clang, a section of the bars swung out into the corridor—a door, whose outline Langan had failed to notice. “What is this?” he said. “What’s happening?”

There was no answer.

“Can I go?”

Nothing.

He looked at the floor, to where his teeth had landed. It was bare. His head a raw, throbbing wound, Langan levered himself off the bunk onto legs so weak they threatened to drop him beside Phoenix. He bent towards the other man, grabbing for his hands. As he lifted them, Phoenix moaned. *Still alive*. Stepping backward, Langan dragged the man through the puddle of his blood, out of the cell. You weren't supposed to move someone as grievously injured as this, but what was the alternative? He hauled Phoenix along the corridor, toward what he hoped was an exit.

Behind them, in the darkest corner of the cell, there was the clack and clatter of teeth rolling against teeth, a deep sigh of what might have been pleasure.

Errata

I've known Ross Lockhart, the driving force behind Word Horde Press, which published *The Fisherman*, for about a decade. When his wife contacted me the other month to ask if I'd write a little something for his imminent birthday, this is what I came up with.

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Most of the errors in my books are my fault, either to begin with, or because I wasn't paying sufficiently close attention during the proofreading stage and missed something. The majority of readers are pretty forgiving of such slip-ups; although it seems there's always going to be someone to e-mail me explaining the difference between "insure" and "ensure" or between "principal" and "principle." (I can't decide if they're taking pleasure in correcting the English teacher, or if they're English teachers overly conscious of the scope of their powers and responsibilities.)

Without doubt the strangest example of this kind of e-mail appeared in my in-box about a month after the publication of my second novel, *The Fisherman*. Instead of identifying the usual sorts of errors, this writer (a Mr. Jyotisha of Seattle) took me to task for something new. The typography of page 85 of my novel was, he wrote, an utter and absolute disgrace, rendering the text all but indecipherable. Whoever had been responsible for laying out the page, he went on, appeared to have done so on top of another piece of printed material, an error he could not comprehend in this day and age of digital everything. Lest I think he was engaging in some form of bizarre jest, Mr. Jyotisha had attached a photo of the offending page of his book. Without considering whether it might be safe to do so, I clicked on the file. (In my defense, if this was a form of phishing or other e-scam, it was pretty specific.)

The image was pretty much what had been described, the words of my novel printed over other text. The resolution on the picture wasn't great, but it looked as if what lay beneath this section of my novel was a mix of words and images, the former elongated characters too narrow to be runes (though

that was what they reminded me of), the latter sets of concentric rings scattered around the page. The effect of the under-text on the sentences floating over it was weird, difficult to describe. Where the long characters intersected my words, they seemed to pull them into bizarre, semi-abstract patterns that reminded me of pictographs; while the rings under my words seemed to bend them into one another, blending them into strange new lexemes.

I closed the file and reached for my copy of The Fisherman. I'll admit, when I turned to page 85, I was half-expecting to find the jumble I had been looking at repeated, an error of such magnitude I couldn't imagine how I could possibly have let it slip past me. (The perils of the same overactive imagination that had led to me writing the novel, I suppose.) In my book, however, the page was fine. The best thing for me to do, I decided, was to forward the e-mail to my publisher, Ross Lockhart, and see if he could work something out with Mr. Jyotisha, maybe send him another copy of the book. This I did, cc'ing Mr. Jyotisha in my e-mail to Ross.

As I didn't hear from either reader or publisher, I assumed the matter settled. At some point thereafter, I must have deleted Mr. Jyotisha's e-mail, because when I searched for it this past month, it was nowhere to be found. The reason I had gone looking for the message had to do with another book Ross had published, Orrin Grey's new collection, *Guignol & Other Sardonic Tales*, which I was reviewing for Locus. (From what I read of it, it's terrific.) When I arrived at page 94, I initially thought that the weird page layout was part of the story I was reading. For I'm not certain how long, I stared at the narrow characters branching among Orrin's words, making them parts of odd figures, the circular distortions warping his sentences into long curves of letters that almost cohered into new words, before I connected what was in front of me and the e-mail I had received a little more than two years before. When the lightbulb glowed over my head, I set the book down and turned to my computer. I was thinking I would compare what was on the page of my ARC with the photograph Mr. Jyotisha had sent me. But, as I've said, I could find no trace of the message.

While mildly annoying, this wasn't an especially big deal (nor much of a surprise: the number of e-mails whose deletion I've had cause to regret is embarrassingly [and frustratingly] large). Still, I thought I should drop Ross

an e-mail, in case what had seemed a one-time printing glitch was in fact a sign of a more systemic and sustained problem. If nothing else, I figured he'd be amused by the coincidence of my encountering the same problem twice.

In the past, it's taken Ross a little bit of time to answer my e-mails, usually a few hours, once in a while as long as a day or two. On this occasion, his reply chimed in my inbox within five minutes. The subject line read, "Skype?" The message itself read "Give me ten minutes," which was followed by a number. I hadn't known Ross to engage in any form of video-conferencing, which is to say, I hadn't known him to engage in it with me, so I didn't see anything too unusual in his request. I propped my tablet on my writing desk (these days, my desktop's too old and unreliable for much beyond word-processing and basic internet surfing), opened Skype, and waited.

The video feed, when I accepted it, was poor. The picture kept freezing, then lurching into motion that was a half-second or so behind what Ross was saying. "John!" he said.

"Hey Ross," I said. "What's going on?"

"These books of mine," he said with a laugh. At least, I think that's what he said: a buzzing echo made him difficult to understand.

"Yeah," I said, "it's pretty weird. Do you have any idea what happened?"

Ross's eyes bulged, his face stilled. A long burst of feedback threatened to cohere into a sentence in a deep, rasping tongue. When the picture returned to motion, Ross was in the midst of speaking: "—from that church, or the one he found in the crypt beneath it."

"I'm sorry," I said, "I missed the first part of what you were saying."

Another blast of noise, this one sufficiently loud to make me wince and lean back from the tablet. Ross's face was caught in a rictus of either manic laughter or rage. Then he was talking, his features calm: "—because Norway doesn't have a formal extradition policy with the US, so he thought he'd be safe there." He shook his head. "You can file that one under irony.

"When I left to start Word Horde, I assumed I'd be okay, which seems pretty stupid, now. But at the time, I still didn't believe what he'd told me,

not really. I was more concerned about money. I had the job at the bookstore to help pay the bills, but that might not be enough, depending on what happened. Anyway, there was one night, my last month working for the two of them, I stayed late to finish the cover design and layout for a book I was pretty sure wasn't going to be published. For a moment, I was positive there was someone staring at me through one of the windows. I looked up, and saw a face…"

"A face?" I said.

"I don't know," he said at last. "There was no way anyone could have been on the other side of the window, because we were four storeys up. At least, that was what I thought. Now…"

"Wait," I said, "what did you see?"

"It could have been a mask," Ross said, "made out of some kind of paper, vellum or something. The surface was faded in spots, smeared with dirt. There was moss growing on one cheek, into one eye. The other eye was dull, cloudy. The face was wrinkled…" He glanced away, exhaled. "All of it was…wrong. The worst part—" A humming buzz replaced whatever he was about to say next. The video feed stuttered, Ross's face shuttling among half a dozen expressions. The sound went on for so long, I thought I was going to have to end the call. The connection righted itself in time for me to catch him saying, "—with a sacred book, any kind of textual mistake would have a real world effect. Think of this thing as a kind of errata made flesh or… whatever.

"Like I said, though, I didn't believe any of what I'd been told. I took the face at the window for a trick of the light, a consequence of too much time staring at Nick Gucker's cover art. If a little part of me wondered whether there might be some truth to Jason's story, I assumed I was safe. I mean, he was the one who'd removed the page from the book, not me.

"I'm still not sure how he…transferred the thing to me. I did have to fill out some paperwork when I left. I flipped through the packet, but I didn't read all of it. Who does? Maybe some page in there assigned the thing to me. How trite, right? I can't believe I would have fallen for something so hackneyed, so clichéd. I mean, it's a digital era: come up with something new. Whatever, it was a hell of a severance package.

”It took me a while to figure out what was happening. I had to see that vellum face another—” Although his mouth continued moving, a low buzz replaced the next several sentences.

“Ross,” I said, “I’m having trouble—”

The audio cut back in, Ross going on as if he hadn’t heard me (which made me wonder if the problems with the connection went both ways). “The idea was to disperse it,” he said, “spread it among dozens, hundreds of books. The effects on the individual reader would be negligible. As long as they weren’t exposed to more than one of the exits, they probably wouldn’t notice anything.”

Struggling as I was to assemble the fragments I had heard into a coherent narrative, Ross’s words sent ice water down my spine. “Wait,” I said. “These exits—what if someone saw two of them?”

“That could be a bit of a problem,” Ross said with an apologetic smile. “Each successive exit has an exponential effect on the one before.”

“I don’t understand what that means,” I said.

A tumult from the closet to my right made me jump out of my chair, heart leaping. The lower portion of the closet is crowded with stacks of books, overflow from my office’s five bookcases. Three of those paper towers had fallen over, in the process dragging a pair of brown slacks and a white shirt down from the clothes rack above them, pushing open the closet door. Shirt and pants formed a flat, headless figure that looked as if it had lunged out of the closet toward me. A coincidence, but unnerving all the same.

When I glanced back at the tablet, the screen had gone black. Ross’s voice said, “I’m really sorry,” and cut out. I pressed the power button a couple of times, to no effect. (Later, the repair guy in town would tell me the device was hopelessly dead, its circuits melted. “What’d you do to this?” he asked; I had no good answer for him.)

Since then, despite numerous attempts, I haven’t been able to contact Ross. He hasn’t replied to my e-mails, my Facebook messages, or my direct messages on Twitter, this despite him maintaining a relatively active presence on social media, posting pictures of his dog, his day job at the bookstore, the books he’s going to be publishing. I made an attempt to locate Mr. Jyotisha, which was no more successful. I couldn’t bring myself

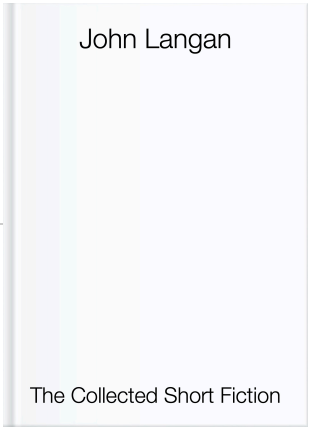
to finish Orrin's collection, which is a shame, because what I had read, I enjoyed. But I couldn't bear to open the book again, even if what Ross had told me was patently ridiculous, impossible. There's a bookcase in the lobby of our local post office where you can donate and pick up used reading material. I contemplated recycling *Guignol* there, only to decide against doing so, my excessive imagination prompting me to place the book in one of my bookcases, between my copy of Laird Barron's *Occultation* and M.R. James's *Selected Stories*.

The same overactive faculty must be why I saw the face in the bathroom window two nights later, as I was rinsing my toothbrush. It was as Ross had described it: dun-colored, the left cheek and eye furred with moss, the entire surface mapped with wrinkles. He hadn't mentioned the tremendous rage, the sheer hatred the thing projected through the glass—my addition to the text, I suppose. The window was empty almost the moment I registered the face, but the resulting shock was enough to send me hurtling out of the bathroom and upstairs to bed without performing my usual nightly duties, rinsing whatever dishes remain in the sink and setting up the next morning's coffee. When my wife remarked on this the next morning, I didn't know what to tell her. I'd seen a scary face at the bathroom window?

A day or so after that, I received an e-mail from Arley at Locus headquarters, asking if I'd like to have a look at a couple of Word Horde's forthcoming titles. Something thumped in the hallway outside my office door. Heart in my throat, I stood to check it. Of course, the hall was empty. Although I had been eagerly looking forward to Carrie Laben's first novel, I wrote Arley that I would have to pass.

Breakwater

First published in *Ashes and Entropy* (December 2018)



Only the main road to Breakwater had not been washed out, so Maureen had no choice but to take the most visible route into the town, around the Jersey state trooper parked in the middle of the road, his cruiser's lights flashing blue and red, miniature lighthouses in the storm's tumult. The cop stared open-mouthed at anyone heading toward the place; though he made no move to stop her. Her car, a gray Escort, was sufficiently nondescript to give the trooper little to remember. Even if it wasn't, the wipers pushing the driving rain back and forth across its windshield reduced her to an androgynous blur of lowered blue baseball cap and baggy white sweatshirt. To further diminish the cop's impression of her, she gave him the typical, compulsive glances of a citizen worried about an offense they weren't sure they were committing. As he didn't swing out to follow her, she assumed her act succeeded.

Either that, or Louise had paid him off to allow her entry. Which, come to think of it, was probably why he remained where he was.

Crossing the low bridge over the ocean inlet, she saw the height of the gray water, swollen with the week's unrelenting rain and storm-boosted tide well up over the docks lining each shore, halfway to the roofs of the intermittent boathouses. Leashed to their submerged posts, a scattering of orphaned sailboats, yachts, and speedboats struggled against the waves rising to their gunwales. On the other side of the bridge, she eased to a stop in front of the first of the town's two traffic lights. Although the gusting wind swung it almost horizontal, the light was functioning, its red lens flashing. Directly beyond the light, the road ahead was blocked by a half-dozen orange and white striped barrels, each with a round blinking yellow light on top of it. For a couple hundred feet, the street descended a gradual incline to the beach, where it dead-ended in a parking area. Since last Saturday, though, the Atlantic had worked its steady way up the slope, enveloping beach

houses and businesses as it climbed, until now its foaming rollers were almost to the bases of the barrels.

Maureen flipped her turn signal and steered right, along Ocean View, the town's principal north-south street, which ran parallel to the ocean. Most of what she remembered about the ocean side of Breakwater, its crowded rows of over-sized, pastel houses, its restaurants and shops, was gone, battered and swept away by the storm. Here and there, the upper floor of a house rose from the waves, the roof of a motel lifted a satellite dish to a signal it was no longer receiving. In places, the pavement dipped slightly, allowing the ocean to wash closer, and the sight of the frothing water reaching for the road tightened her fingers on the wheel. *Three hours*, she thought. *Two at the inside, four at the outside. Plenty of time*.

This was assuming, of course, the meteorologists were correct in their estimate of the number of hours remaining until the Atlantic rolled over this part of the town. From the speed with which it had coalesced, to its stalling over Breakwater, to the length of time it had raged with no appreciable diminishment, enough about this storm had been unprecedented, and to such a degree, as to render all predictions concerning it suspect. *Give me one hour*, Maureen thought. *Thirty minutes*.

A mile along Ocean View, Poseidon's Palace Motel stood on the left, two stories of sea-foam and pink cinderblock, a hold-over from days when Breakwater had attracted vacationers of a more modest means. A foot of water rippled over the empty parking lot, washed the bottoms of the doors to the ground floor rooms, splashed the base of the sign whose neon letters, now dead, advertised neither vacancy nor full.

Not for the first time, Maureen wished she had acted on her impulse the moment Frank had said that sure, he used his EZ Pass on the drive here, why wouldn't he? and no, he hadn't shut off the GPS on his phone, why should he? On the spot, she had wanted to flee, to climb into her rental and take off while time remained before whoever Louise had hired to surveil her errant husband appeared, camera at the ready. Frank could join her if he wished, provided he left his cell in his car. Twenty-one years a private investigator, most of them spent gathering evidence on unfaithful spouses, and she had known what was going to happen. Hell, until Louise fired her, she had been the one with the telephoto lens, keeping a long-distance eye

on the very handsome Frank as he roamed up and down the Hudson Valley from Wiltwyck to Manhattan, representing his ailing and reclusive (and significantly older) wife at gallery openings, philharmonic concerts, and benefit events for a range of charities. She had filled most of a thumb drive with the pictures she accumulated of Frank deep in conversation with this museum director, waltzing with that violinist at an after-party, laughing with the local TV anchor who was co-hosting the silent auction. None of those photos, though, went beyond the vaguely disquieting: Frank leaning a tad too close to a painter, or placing his hand on a cellist's elbow, or giving an enthusiastic hug to a socialite in a gauzy excuse for a dress. To the best of Maureen's not-inconsiderable ability to tell, Louise Westerford's husband enjoyed walking to within sight of the boundaries of their marriage but had not trespassed them.

No, for that he would require (oh irony!) two conversations, one short, one long, with the woman who had been his unseen companion for the better part of six months, the first in an upscale restaurant in White Plains the month after Louise told her her services would no longer be required, the second in the restaurant-bar of the Motel 6 off the Thruway in Wiltwyck. When Maureen had sat down in Louise's study with its assortment of occult paraphernalia—bookcases full of big, leather-bound volumes, stuffed ravens mounted on gnarled wire armatures, a crystal ball the size of a baby's head cradled by a stand decorated with grinning devils—a sudden surge of pity for this woman twelve years her senior, her terribly thin body wrapped in enough black scarves to make Stevie Nicks jealous, had stirred her to venture beyond her usual detailed summary of her findings and review of her expenses. It appeared to her, Maureen said, that while Mrs. Westerford's husband appreciated the company of attractive women, his admiration had not led to anything more. And if she didn't mind her saying, Maureen had noticed that Mrs. Westerford's husband appeared to be quite lonely. Those nights he wasn't committed to an event or social gathering, he tended to dine by himself at one of a half-dozen restaurants, spending his time reading on his tablet. Rather than paying her to watch him, Mrs. Westerford might consider the possibility of joining him for some of those dinners; she might find an hour or two of talking with him over a nice bottle of wine and a good meal would do as much to allay her concerns over her

husband's fidelity as employing a private investigator to document his every move.

Throughout Maureen's speech, Louise Westerford had regarded her with her large, liquid blue eyes as if she were speaking a language Louise found both unintelligible and distasteful. When Maureen was done, Louise had summarily fired her and summoned a maid to escort her out the front door. It had been a long time—as in, going back to her first years as a PI—since Maureen had been dismissed so casually, and though she told herself it was not the reason she sought out Frank four weeks later at his favorite steak house, the lie was too blatant to maintain. Give her this much credit: it had taken a month of debating whether to approach the man before she sat down across the table from him and introduced herself. She had been blunt, to the point, meeting his inevitable disbelief in her tale by handing her phone to him and allowing him to flick through the selection of photos she'd uploaded to it. Mingled with his shock had been curiosity. Why was she telling him all of this? "Because I don't like being treated the way your wife treated me," Maureen said. "Plus, you don't seem as bad as she's afraid you are, and I thought you should know about this." What was he supposed to do now? he wanted to know. Maureen didn't have any answers for him. Soon thereafter, she left. He asked for a number he could reach her at, in case he wanted to discuss this some more, but she refused. "I'm not the one you need to talk to," she said.

Nonetheless, when he called the following week, she agreed to meet him at McCabe's, the restaurant-bar attached to the Motel 6. She wasn't especially surprised he'd located her. She'd provided him her name and profession; her contact information was one Google search away. She had no interest in speaking to Frank, but residual spite toward Louise prompted her to accept his request; though she countered his suggestion of Fulci's, whose waterfront popularity begged someone to notice them, with McCabe's, whose dim lighting and high-backed booths offered more in the way of privacy. He questioned the location, insisting he had nothing to hide. "Good for you," she said. "How do you suppose it's going to look for me if I'm seen out with a recent client's husband—a man, by the way, I've been investigating for possible adultery?" Her point taken, they had met at McCabe's.

Afterward, when they were lying on the bed whose blanket and sheets they had kicked off, Frank asked her if she had planned for this to happen. She denied it but was uncertain how honest her answer was. You invite someone who has learned troubling information about his spouse to meet you for a few drinks at a bar connected to a motel; you proceed to buy round after round of bourbon for him, tequila for you, exchanging life stories along the way; you inform him you're going to take a room for the night because you're too drunk to drive and you don't like to sleep in your car. How was that anything but a plan for seduction? She could imagine what the attorneys she worked with would make of any claims to the contrary. Her intentions were purer when she told Frank this was a one-time thing; although the vow held only until he appeared at her office door a couple of days later, as she was preparing to close-up shop. They did it right there on her desk, with the door unlocked. Maureen wasn't a size queen (a good thing in Frank's case), but damn, did he know how to use what he had. No doubt, the illicit nature of what they were doing added to its thrill, as in the days to follow he continued to return to her office when she was about to leave, and they added the couch, both her office chairs, and the floor to the register of places on which they stirred one another to shuddering climax.

Yet if the sex was good, to the point of Maureen wishing she smoked, so she could light a cigarette after, the talks they had in the sodium light falling in orange stripes through the Venetian blinds were better. Maureen had experienced her share of good sex (though perhaps not at quite this level), but a partner with whom she could enjoy a decent conversation had proven more elusive. She told herself she was going to bring the affair to an end but settled for moving it from her office to her apartment, picking up Frank at a different location each time and driving him to her place via a new and circuitous route. Already, she was on the lookout for her replacement, the next PI Louise Westerford would have retained to trail her wandering husband. Maureen didn't like hotels, whose security systems were built around video cameras, as were those at the majority of motels; although there was a seedy place off 9W in Highland at which she and Frank passed a couple of dirty evenings. He thought her precautions charming, but within a few weeks was chafing under them, going so far as to ask if it would be that bad for Louise's agent to discover their affair. "Yes," Maureen said,

sitting up in her bed. “Your wife is very rich. That makes her much more powerful than either of us. She could divorce you and leave you with nothing. Hell, with the lawyers she could afford, you’d wind up owing her alimony. She could call the politicians she’s donated to and have them yank my license. Trust me, you do not want to fuck with the rich.”

Frank accused her of exaggerating. Louise, he said, was far more interested in her mystical studies than she was in ruining either of their lives. Sure, a divorce would be unpleasant, but it wouldn’t be the catastrophe Maureen was describing. His wife loathed public attention, which was why she sent him to represent her hither and yon. If they split, she would want the proceedings to be as low-key as possible. Although she knew he was underestimating the effect betrayal would have on a spouse, Maureen had not argued the point, as she had not argued a month later at Breakwater, when Frank admitted his failure to cover his tracks. In part, this was because of the promise implied by his words, a vision of a life together she found surprisingly compelling, even as she heard herself disabusing two decades’ worth of adulterers of similar fantasies. Like them, she had become addicted to that most dangerous narcotic, hope, and her ability to recognize her disease did nothing to blunt its power. Yes, she wore large sunglasses and a sunhat, but as far as disguises went, the combination was lacking. At the end of their four-day excursion to the Jersey shore, when Frank expressed his intention to talk to his wife, Maureen didn’t ask what he was going to discuss, nor did she attempt to dissuade him from his plan. Amazing, the effect a surplus of fine dining and athletic sex could have on her. She wasn’t just addicted: she was overdosing.

Enough of her critical faculties remained, however, for her to be on edge when after four days, then five, then six, Frank had not communicated with her. Had he lost his nerve? Had his romantic sentiments been nothing more than the side-effect of the endorphins saturating his blood? *Patience*, she thought, trying to focus on her current caseload, to watch the news. Sandwiched between reports of the current scandals roiling Washington and Hollywood was a feature on a freak storm which had coalesced in the Atlantic and swung due west, toward central New Jersey. Maureen missed the explanation for why something that looked like a small hurricane on the satellite photos wasn’t designated one and formally named, but she did

notice the name of the location where the storm barreled ashore, the vacation town of Breakwater. As the days proceeded with no word from Frank, coverage of the storm elbowed its way to the lead of each broadcast. After lifting the ocean into a surge that had washed away much of Breakwater's shore, the storm had parked itself over the town. Instead of lessening, it gained in intensity, lashing Breakwater with driving rain and high waves, spinning off tornadoes like enormous tops, dragging the Atlantic higher and higher up the ocean-facing streets. What portion of the populace hadn't fled the storm's approach rectified their error and headed inland. Meteorologists struggled to explain the storm's behavior, employing increasingly elaborate models to account for it, predicting an imminent departure the system had yet to make. While she knew the location of the storm's landfall had nothing to do with her and Frank's excursion there, the coincidence was difficult to ignore. As his failure to send so much as a simple text reached the two-week mark, and her certainty that no such communication was on its way grew, Maureen began to take a grim satisfaction in the reports of the destruction of the place where she had been so stupid, so naïve. The storm came to seem an embodiment of the disappointment and hurt weighting her chest, its objective correlative, a term her brain retrieved from some college literature course or another.

Yet when her cell played its tinny version of the theme from *Magnum, PI* and she recognized the number of the Tracfone she had insisted Frank buy, she nearly dropped her phone in her haste to answer it. Her "Hello?" struggled to contain thirteen days' worth of anxiety and doubt. But damned if her heart didn't lift at the sound of Frank's, "Maureen."

Already, though, she heard the hoarseness in his voice. "What's wrong?"

Another voice replaced his. "I believe we all know the answer to that."

Maureen's mouth went dry. "Louise."

"Mrs. Westerford—at least for the moment."

There was no point in playing dumb. If Frank was there and she had the Tracfone, then Louise knew enough for any theatrics to be a waste of time. Maureen said, "What can I do for you?"

"Oh, I think you've done quite enough, already. From what my husband tells me, admirably so, much better than an old sack of bones like me." The

fury in her words was terrifying.

"Mrs. Westerford—"

"Check your e-mail."

"I'm sorry?"

"I said, Check your e-mail."

Maureen was already at her computer. She opened her gmail account. The message had been sent while they were talking. Its subject line read, "Poseidon's Palace Room 211." Maureen clicked on the photo attached, and there was Frank, naked, roped to a chair, his flesh a patchwork of bruises, some purple and fresh, others green and yellow and old. Long cuts traversed his chest, biceps, and thighs, half of them scabbed-over, half weeping blood. The worst, though, was his face, which bore the marks of sustained beatings, the eyes swollen shut, the nose mashed and bloody, the lips torn, a handful of teeth missing from bloody sockets. Maureen stared at the image, her pulse pounding at the base of her throat with such intensity she feared she was about to throw up.

"Do you understand?" Louise Westerford said.

"You don't need to do this," Maureen said.

"You know nothing of what I do and do not need. Right now, my needs include seeing you at the location where this photograph was taken within the next twenty-four hours."

"All right. I'll come. Don't hurt Frank anymore. Please."

Louise hung up.

The screen of Maureen's computer flickered, and the image of Frank disappeared, to be replaced by the g-mail login page, on which was the message "Error: Account Not Found." A second later, a pop sounded inside the computer's tower, and the screen went black. The machine sighed, and the power light blinked off. A strong odor of burnt plastic and metal issued from the stack. Maureen spent the next several minutes attempting to resuscitate it, but whatever malware Louise had employed had reduced the computer to an over-sized paperweight. Louise was covering her tracks, ensuring no data trail to incriminate her. As more and more of her business had involved an online component, Maureen had armored her PC with

successive firewalls, a squadron of the most efficient anti-malware available. For Louise to have slipped through all of it was more than a little intimidating. Maureen's phone buzzed; she checked it, only to discover it, too, had been rendered inert. Although the possibility existed that a specialist in electronic forensics might be able to detect Louise's fingerprints on the attack of her devices, such investigation required time she didn't have. Instead, Maureen retrieved a wallet from the bottom right drawer of her desk, checked its contents, and left her office.

Ten years past, Maureen had been hired by the wife of a local crime magnate to document his numerous infidelities. The case had been no more risky than most until, during a tirade fueled by box wine and cocaine, Mrs. LaPierre had boasted to her husband about knowing every last thing he had been up to, thanks to her private eye, which assertion Mr. LaPierre had taken to encompass his extra-legal as well as his extra-marital affairs. After gouging out the eyes of his head of security, the gangster had devoted the substantial resources of his criminal network to discover the identity of the person investigating him. The ensuing weeks had been the most perilous and tense of Maureen's career. Only by an exercise in bravado that had led to a sit-down with Étienne LaPierre in the palatial living room of his Catskill mansion had she survived them. The experience had prompted her to establish a series of protocols in case she ever should find herself again in a similar or worse situation. These, she put into action with a drive to the local bank, into whose ATM she inserted a debit card in the name of Irene Paretsky. The ATM would allow her to withdraw a maximum of five hundred dollars, which she did. Next was a stop at the Wiltwyck Trailways, where she used a Visa card signed Irene Paretsky to purchase a one-way ticket on the next bus to Montreal, leaving in two hours.

The same credit card paid for a Tracfone and a pair of hundred minute phone cards at the Wal-Mart on the other side of town, along with a selection of toiletries, a small overnight bag in which to carry them, a pink and yellow sunhat, and a blue Yankees cap. She activated the phone, loaded the minutes, and punched in the number written on a slip in the wallet. It was for a small hotel on the outskirts of Montreal. While she was on the line with the front desk clerk, she asked for recommendations for car rental places, and once Ms. Paretsky's room was booked, called the second

company the clerk had recommended. She reserved a sub-compact for two days from now, insisting she wanted a vehicle with good gas mileage.

Next to the bus station was a diner to the far side of whose parking lot she drove, parking and locking her car. She ordered a Monte Cristo with fries at the diner, which Irene Paretsky's Visa also took care of. Fifteen minutes before the bus was scheduled to head for the Thruway, Maureen exited the diner and joined the line waiting for it. Once she had identified the positions of the security cameras, she withdrew the sunhat from its plastic bag, glanced from side to side, and placed it on her head. After boarding the bus, she seated herself beside the college-age woman she had identified ahead of her on the line. Five minutes' conversation—and two hundred dollars, cash—was sufficient to persuade the woman, who was transferring at the station in Albany to a bus headed for Buffalo, to agree to wear the pink and yellow sunhat all the way to western New York. Maureen slipped off her jacket, folded and stuffed it into the bag that had contained the hat, pulled on the baseball cap, and as the driver was checking the tickets of a pair of last-minute passengers, left the vehicle, apologizing to the driver for having mistaken this for the bus to Springfield.

Hunched over, the bag containing her jacket clutched in her arms, Maureen scuttled across the parking lot, out of view of the cameras. She left her car where it was and walked four blocks south, to a cinderblock garage on a lot between a pair of two-family homes. A key on her keychain opened and allowed her to raise the door. Inside was a dirty white Ford Escort registered to Christie Sayers, which was also the name on the rental agreement for the garage. The keys to the car were in the glove compartment. Maureen started the Escort, backed it onto the street, and closed and locked the garage behind her.

She headed to a storage facility at the edge of the shopping plazas on the northeastern side of the city. A key duct-taped to the bottom of the driver's seat unlocked a storage locker the dimensions of a large walk-in closet. From plastic tubs stacked against the rear wall, she removed two sets of clothes, jeans, loose knit shirts, socks, and underwear. After changing into one outfit, she packed the other in a black duffel bag lying on top of a green suitcase. To it, she added the toiletries she'd picked up at Wal-Mart. The clothes she had been wearing, she pushed into a garbage bag she tied with a

plastic tag and placed on top of the plastic tubs. From the footwear arranged to the right of the tubs, she selected a pair of Doc Martens, which she tugged on and laced up, and a pair of sneakers, which she added to the duffel bag. The locker didn't contain much in the way of men's wear, only a few pairs of sweatpants and t-shirts hanging from a short clothes rack. She selected pants and a shirt approximately Frank's size and folded and placed them in the bag. She returned the baseball cap to her head.

Last came the filing cabinet on the left, which she unlocked with a key concealed under a piece of duct-tape beneath the plastic tubs. From the top drawer, she removed a flat metal box, which she set on a folding card table in the center of the locker. From the bottom drawer, she lifted a bundle wrapped in plastic and tape. The metal box contained five thousand dollars in five stacks of rubber-banded hundred dollar bills, and, more importantly, a blue Argentine passport, driver's license, and a debit card for the Citi Belgrano in Buenos Aires. All were in the name of Mariana Highsmith. There was also a clasp knife, and a pair of books that had come from the Avila bookstore in Buenos Aires: a guidebook to the American northeast and a book of conversational English. She slid the Irene Paretsky debit and Visa cards from her wallet, dropped them in the box, and replaced them with Mariana Highsmith's license and bank card. She zipped the passport into a pocket on one side of the duffel bag, along with the money. The books went in with the clothes. Using the clasp knife, she cut the tape and plastic from the bundle.

Inside were a pair of .38 revolvers, a crumpled box of bullets, a pair of short plastic tubes, a plastic sandwich bag filled with cotton, another plastic sandwich bag filled with metal washers, and a roll of black duct tape. Careful inspection of the guns would have revealed their serial numbers filed down to the metal. Maureen loaded the cylinders, set the revolvers aside, and turned her attention to the tubes, cotton, and washers, from which she spent the next half hour fashioning two makeshift silencers she attached to the pistols using the tape. The silencers secure, she carried the guns and the tape out to the Escort, whose trunk she popped. Half a dozen empty plastic shopping bags littered the floor. She selected a bag for each pistol and wrapped the weapon in it. With the tape, she affixed one gun to the front right wheel well, the other to the rear left wheel well. Leaving the

trunk open, she returned inside, where she zipped the duffel bag and exited the locker, whose door she lowered and locked. She deposited the bag in the trunk, then drove across town to the parking lot of the Holiday Inn near the Thruway exit.

She steered to the back of the building, easing the car into a space next to a beige minivan with Virginia plates. She shut off the engine, reclined her seat, lowered the baseball cap's bill over her eyes. Her nerves crackled with anger and anxiety; it was all she could do not to start the car and speed for the Thruway. Breakwater was a good three hours south, though, and that without the disruption of the storm battering it. There was no sense in compounding the fatigue of a long drive with the exhaustion of a sleepless night. Plus, she preferred to arrive in the town during the daylight. She could at least rest. Somewhat to her surprise, she dropped into a deep, dreamless sleep from which she was awakened by the minivan's family climbing into it for an early start. A stop at the Quick Check up the street allowed her to use the toilet, splash water on her face, and purchase a large coffee, sausage-egg-and-cheese sandwich, and a bag of trail mix. She paid cash, as she did for the tolls for the Thruway and, later, the Jersey Turnpike.

Which brought her to here, now, to the parking lot of the Porcelain Pig Family Restaurant (closed), across Ocean View from the motel where she and Frank had enjoyed their last happy time together. Rain sizzled against the Escort's windows, thundered on its roof. Wind gusted to a shriek, rocking the car. Between the rain and the distance, she couldn't tell if anyone in Room 211 had registered her arrival. Best to assume they had. She was guessing Louise Westerford had a minimum of three, as many as five, men with her. One to either side of the door, positioned to grab her as she entered the room. The others stationed nearby should it prove necessary to assist those two. Possibly a man hiding in the bathroom in case the situation seriously deteriorated. She pictured the room, the king-sized bed facing the room door, the bathroom down a short hall beyond it. Assuming he was still bound to the chair, Frank would be on the left.

She took a deep breath, released it slowly. With the Irene Paretsky identity, whose connection to her could be traced easily, she had set in motion one narrative, in which, frightened by Louise Westerford's threats, she had adopted another persona and fled the country. Assuming whatever hacker

Louise was employing had discovered the alias and was tracking her through its purchases, the ruse should distract the older woman, cause her to divert resources in the direction of Montreal to deal with this fresh wrinkle. Because there was no doubt Louise intended the same or worse vengeance on her. Looking ahead, the same obvious link between Maureen and Irene would throw the police off her trail, at least temporarily.

She drew in another breath, let it out slowly. The Christie Sayers identity would be considerably more difficult to connect to her, and the time it would take the cops to do so, and then to search the video archives of the Thruway cameras for the Escort, and then to do the same for the Turnpike's video records, would extend her lead.

She inhaled deeply, exhaled slowly. In this day and age, you could hardly say something was untraceable, but the Mariana Highsmith identity was as close to it as a considerable sum of money could buy. If the police succeeded in doing so, it would be long after she had flown to Buenos Aires, emptied her account at the Citi Belgrano, and left in a rental car for the border with Uruguay. The only thing for which she had not planned was having someone else with her, especially a companion as grievously hurt as Frank. It was a complication, but not an insurmountable one. If she could get Frank to Newark, there was a small apartment on the western edge of the city rented to Ruth Abbot, where they could hole up for a few days while she sought medical care for him, and prepared for his departure from the country.

She took a deep breath, let it drain from her slowly. Thus far, Maureen had done her best to put the photo of his naked, wounded body from her thoughts. Now she allowed herself to remember it, to see the damage days of beatings had done to him. She pictured the wreck of his face. No doubt he had suffered internal damage, broken ribs, a bruised liver or kidney, a possible retinal detachment or blowout fracture. Cold, murderous rage rose in her. When she was ready to kill Louise Westerford, she zipped her raincoat and stepped out into the storm.

Rain lashed her. To her relief, the revolvers were where she had fastened them, which had been the idea, but as she crouched beside each wheel well, a surge of panic made her certain that pistol was gone, jostled loose by the combination of distance and weather. She stripped the guns of their

covering, wadded the tape and bag into a ball, and tucked the ball into her raincoat's front pocket. Holding a revolver in either hand, she crossed the street. Water streamed from the baseball cap. Wind pushed her like an enormous animal, a dog or horse shoving her this way and that. Roaring filled the air overhead. She kept the pistols close to her legs, silencers pointing down.

On the other side of the street, she descended the short ramp to the motel's submerged parking lot. The water was cold, most of the way up her shins. She splashed across the pavement to a passage between the main office and the motel proper. A set of stairs climbed to the second floor. Her boots squelched as she ascended them. At the top of the stairs, she turned right, following the walkway that wrapped around the front of the building. Despite the rain pouring from the front of the cap, she could see the door to Room 211 open ahead. Louise's men weren't leaving anything to chance. They would be fast; she would have to be faster. Her sole advantage lay in the possibility Louise did not want her dead right away. She was at the doorway. She turned and entered it.

What happened next occurred with almost startling clarity. Maureen raised the gun in each hand to either side of her and squeezed the trigger. The pistols made a spitting sound, jerked slightly in her grip. The men flanking the doorway collapsed, one with a red hole in his throat, the other with a red hole in his cheek. Maureen swung the gun in front of her, to where Frank slumped forward in his chair, a man in a black turtleneck and jeans to his left, Louise—also in turtleneck and jeans—to his right, a bloody carving knife in her hand. Maureen shot the man in the chest and Louise in the chest. The man crumpled to the carpet. Louise stepped away from Frank. Maureen shot her again, also in the chest. Louise dropped the knife and sat. Pistols held out before her, Maureen advanced past Frank to the bathroom, through whose open door she saw a man in a black turtleneck and jeans rising from his seat on the edge of the bathtub, a .45 in his left hand. She shot him in the chest, the silencer on the right pistol puffing apart, sending washers pinging off the tiled floor and walls. The man tried to retreat, backed against the edge of the tub, fell into it, and did not rise. Guns leading the way, Maureen exited the bathroom.

She approached Frank, whose torso was covered in a sheet of blood from, she saw, the ear to ear cut Louise had made to his throat. Covering the room with the .38 in her right hand, she brought her left behind her and slid that pistol inside the waist of her jeans. With her free hand, she felt Frank's bloody neck for a pulse. There was none.

Maureen moved her hand to Frank's shoulder and lowered her head. The acrid smell of gunpowder mixed with the metallic odor of blood. Riding the adrenaline coursing her veins, grief rushed over her. Blood dripped and pattered from the chair to the carpet. Rain blew in the open door. A part of her mind was telling her she had to go, she'd been too late for Frank but at least she had ensured she wouldn't have to watch for Louise in her rearview mirror. Likely, after she murdered Maureen, Louise had planned on the storm destroying the motel, if not carrying the bodies of her husband and his mistress out to sea, then confusing the means of their deaths for anyone who cared to investigate. The same plan could work for Maureen, provided she wasn't here when the waves and wind brought the building down. She lifted her hand from Frank's shoulder to touch his hair.

And started back as his head jerked up. A horrible bubbling wheeze filled the air, the sound of someone attempting to breathe through a throat that had been slashed. Maureen dropped her gun, dug in the front pocket of her jeans for her clasp knife. Frank rocked weakly from side to side, struggling against his bloody bindings. She opened the knife, grabbed the topmost loop of rope, and sawed at it. The wheezing continued. She cut the next loop down, the two below that, and the remainder of the rope slackened, slithering to the carpet. Before Maureen could catch him, Frank pitched forward. She shoved the chair out of the way and knelt beside him, casting the knife aside so she could grab his shoulders and turn him over.

The wound to his neck gaped. (Was this why she couldn't find a pulse there?) His eyes bulged, his lips trembling with words he could not voice. "Shh," Maureen said. "It's all right." Which it most decidedly was not. Given the opening in his throat and the volume of blood he had lost, she could not understand how Frank could possibly be alive, nor could she imagine the story she was going to tell at whatever hospital she sped him to. As for how this was going to complicate her already complicated escape plans…

She heard movement behind her. In an instant, she had the .38 out from the waistband of her jeans and turned with it pointing at Louise Westerford, who was using the bed to pull herself to standing. Maureen considered shooting her again, hesitated. The front of Louise's black turtleneck was sodden with blood. When the older woman pressed her hand to it, her fingers and palm came away crimson. She stared at Maureen with her large blue eyes and said, with some measure of astonishment, "That hurt."

"It's called being shot," Maureen said, and squeezed the trigger. Having outlived its brief lifespan, the silencer did not muffle the BANG. Louise's head snapped back as a hole opened in the center of her forehead. There was surprisingly little blood. She closed her eyes, but remained standing. A moment passed, and then she said, "You are making it difficult for me not to kill you." She opened her eyes, and they were white, smooth marble orbs.

"What the fuck?" Maureen said, and aimed the gun at her again.

"Don't bother." Louise waved her bloody hand, and the pistol was wrenched from Maureen's grip and thrown across the room. "What the fuck?" Maureen said.

"Oh, you have much bigger concerns," Louise said. "Why don't you check your beloved's heartbeat?"

Fearing him suddenly inert, Maureen glanced at Frank, who regarded the scene with the same wonder and horror as she. "He's fine. Well, except for where you tried to cut his fucking throat."

"I did not 'try' anything," Louise said. "I sliced his major blood vessels and windpipe. Go on. Tell me what his heart rate is."

Maureen touched Frank's neck, but still couldn't find anything. She caught his left arm, pressed her fingertips to his wrist. Nothing there, either, or from his other wrist. Finally, she leaned down and pressed her ear to his blood-soaked chest. It was silent. She lifted her head and looked at Frank, whose expression said that he, too, could not detect his heart's beating. She looked at Louise. "What is this?"

"Revenge," Louise said, "on my faithless husband and the woman with whom he betrayed me. Someone I hired," she added, her tone thick with contempt.

Wind gusted into the room, bringing with it a spray of rain that swept around Louise and splashed against the ceiling. How had Maureen ever thought this woman frail, weak? The very air surrounding her was different, darker. Maureen remembered the room in which she had met Louise to review her findings concerning Frank, the big leather books with their Latin titles, the crystal ball on its metal stand ornamented with devils, and said, “You’re a witch?”

“Please,” Louise said. “What I am is someone who has spent a lifetime mastering knowledge that was old when the ice sheets weighted the land. I have given more of myself than you can conceive to learning secrets that would crisp your nerves, char the bones inside you.”

“Then why did you bother hiring me? Couldn’t you have kept an eye on Frank, yourself?”

“My energies were required elsewhere,” Louise said. “In general, I’ve found money as efficient a means of achieving my ends as the arts of the left hand. Your reputation was impeccable. I was concerned my rivals might attempt to strike at me through my husband. It seemed simpler to employ you to monitor him than to divert the strength necessary for me to do so, personally. Little did I know.” She barked a laugh.

“Okay,” Maureen said, “but once you did know, couldn’t you have let him go gently? Did you have to hurt him like this?”

“Yes I did. Within my community, I have a certain standing to maintain. This does not include my husband committing adultery with a hireling. Beyond that, I loved him.” Louise shook her gory head. “I loved him with everything I had. You cannot sully such a gift, you cannot spit on it and rag it through the mud and expect there to be no consequences.”

“How self-righteous.”

“I do not have to justify myself to you, of all people.” White fire danced over her blank eyes. “I am the one who was wronged.”

“So it’s one down, one to go, is that it?”

“It’s this entire miserable town to go.”

“You’re serious.”

“I will not be satisfied until this place has been swept from the face of the Earth.”

“The storm—”

“Yes.”

“Jesus,” Maureen said, not irreverently. “And Frank?”

“Will stay as he is. The waves will take him far from here, out to where the water is deep. There, he’ll float while the water softens his flesh and the creatures of the sea consume him, all the while conscious of his slow devouring.”

“I assume you’re planning a similar fate for me.”

“Oh yes,” Louise said. “Unless—”

“Unless what?”

“I wonder what you would do to spare your beloved further suffering?”

“What do you mean?”

Louise flicked her right hand, and the carving knife she had been holding when Maureen entered the room lifted off the carpet and wobbled through the air to hang in front of Maureen, serrated blade down. She tensed, ready for the weapon to point at her and attack. “Go on,” Louise said, “take it.”

Still suspicious, Maureen reached out and caught the carving knife’s pebbled hilt. When her fingers closed on it, whatever force had been suspending the blade released it. “All right,” she said, “what now?”

“Cut your throat.”

Maureen’s stomach dropped. “What?”

“Press the edge of the knife to the left side of your neck and draw it across to the right. I doubt you’ll be able to open the windpipe, but you should have no trouble with the major blood vessels.”

“You aren’t kidding.”

“I am not.”

Even through the blood streaking it, Maureen could see how sharp the blade’s teeth were. She looked at Frank, who was watching her and

Louise's exchange with an expression of terror. Her lips dry, Maureen said, "If I do?"

"Then Frank will be released."

"What happens to me?"

"This isn't about what happens to you; it's a test of your feelings for your beloved. Who knows, though? If you open your veins, I might decide this town has suffered enough."

"And if I don't accept your offer?"

Malice lit Louise's features. "Perhaps I'll let you live."

"You will? Why?"

"For this to be a true test of your commitment to Frank, your possible fate cannot be a factor. You might obey my request simply to spare yourself further suffering. Let's remove that from consideration."

"What about revenge? What about your standing in your community?"

"I trust the condition of this town has not escaped you. I know the condition of my husband has not." Louise smiled without humor. "Anyone who learns of either of these acts will be reminded that I am not to be trifled with. As for vengeance, if you understood anything of it, you would realize that the choice I am offering you is a far superior version of it than ripping the flesh from your bones."

Louise was right. If Maureen took the knife to her throat, Frank would have to watch her. Presumably, Louise would keep him alive until she had bled out, or was in the same half-life as he. That would be the sight he would take with him into death, the last of days of abuses. Maureen would have committed herself to who could say what? Nothing good, that much was certain. On the other hand, if she walked out the door, crossed the street, got into her car, and drove away, Frank would be abandoned by the woman for whom he had abandoned his wife, a betrayal he would take with him as the ocean carried him into its salty depths. Nor could Maureen expect to escape the consequences of such a decision, the guilt that would empty her as thoroughly as a coroner at an autopsy. She could practically see the empty Stoli bottles, the containers of sedatives spilled on her kitchen counter, Glock out on the coffee table, a round in the chamber.

“Well?” Louise said.

Surely, there was a third option, an avenue she had overlooked in the insanity of events. Was she close enough, fast enough for a lunge at Louise? Would—could it succeed? The leaking hole in Louise’s forehead strongly suggested it could not. Was the attempt worth it anyway, as a last gesture of defiance? Where would that leave Frank, though? She glanced at him, at his savaged body. He was trying to tell her something, his swollen and bloody lips mouthing a silent syllable. *Go?* She wasn’t sure.

“You can’t prolong this forever,” Louise said.

“This is part of the revenge, isn’t it? The trying to decide.”

“You’re learning.”

“You’re a bitch.”

“You’re out of time. Make your choice.”

On legs stiff from crouching beside Frank, Maureen stood. The carving knife was heavy in her hand. Her muscles tensed at what was to come next. Louise watched her with her blank, pitiless eyes.

For Fiona

At Home in the House of the Devil

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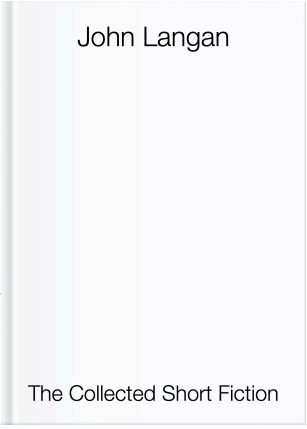

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"Every man meets the Devil once before he dies." My father likes to say this. It's among his favorite expressions, a handy aphorism to be trotted out to meet all manner of circumstances. He says he heard it from his father, who hailed from Gourock, a town on Scotland's west coast. In turn, Grandpa is supposed to have taken it from the lips of his uncle, a minister in the Church of Scotland. According to Dad, Great-great-uncle Michael had claimed the saying was an old Scottish one, so for Dad—born and raised in Brooklyn before moving to California to pursue first his education and then his dream of being a screenwriter—to use it has been to assert his heritage, to insist on his own way of looking at things. I haven't researched the matter thoroughly, but the reading and online searching I have done, not to mention, a brief e-mail exchange with the minister holding my great-great-uncle's position, fails to support either my father, or, assuming he was telling the truth, my grandfather. Given the history of Scottish Protestantism, with its concern, if not obsession, with the Devil, a figure frightfully close, standing practically at your elbow, wearing nice clothes that somehow still look shabby, tainting the air with the smell of rotten eggs, waiting for the moment his open hand can clutch your arm and drag you down to damnation—well, it's not hard to believe that Dad's expression could have had its origin in the kirks. At the very least—assuming he was telling the truth and the saying wasn't something he had picked up in his vast, if irregular, reading and tried to pass off as more pedigreed than it was—I could picture Great-great-uncle Michael, whose broad face gazed out of a black and white portrait Dad gave pride of place in the living room, dressed in his dark ministerial robes, thundering the words from his pulpit.

Even though I knew the saying was Scottish, or supposed to be, for a long time it had seemed to me more American: to be specific, more like the kind of thing you would have heard in an old blues song. I had no trouble hearing Robert Johnson, whom I discovered my freshman year at UCLA, when on impulse I bought a two-tape compilation of his music, singing the words in his high, clear voice, his hands playing one guitar so that it sounded like two. I could almost see beyond the words to the night Johnson was supposed to have had his famous meeting with the Devil, the moon high and full and bright, the air thick and hot and ripe with a stink like rotting fish, the man waiting at the dirt crossroads, wearing a baggy suit that looked as if it were cut to fit someone larger, a greasy fedora shading his face, a guitar that clearly had seen better days hanging from his left hand like a slaughtered bird. This Devil didn't need to haul you off to Hell. This Devil knew it was you that had come looking for him, and he was more than willing to talk to you, deal with you, because he knew a jealous husband would be mixing you a glass of whiskey and strychnine in another year or two, and you'd be walking down the rocky path to his tar-paper shack on your own.

When I had my own meeting with the Devil, I no longer believed in him. Who was it said that was his greatest feat, making us think he was a figment of humanity's collective imagination, no more than a repository for millennia of western culture's psychic baggage? Was it Baudelaire? That's the kind of thing my dad would know; he has the fortunate combination of having read widely and possessing an almost photographic memory. When he is focused, when he isn't in grip of the lethargy that sometimes afflicts him, sometimes so severely that he spends most of his day plopped on the couch in his sweats, thumbing the remote so fast the TV is practically strobing—he can remain like this for days, so long that his behavior goes from worrisome to frightening, and I used to fear he had some variety of bipolar disorder but could never find the words to convince him to consult a doctor about it ("I just need some downtime, that's all," was his answer to my concerns; if I pursued the matter, he would add, "How often am I like this? Once a month? Not even—once every other month, tops. Stop worrying." All of which was sufficiently true for me not to have a good response to it. [Mentioning that he had been this way since my mother's

departure, some thirteen years into their marriage, three years before the heart attack that killed her, caused something to flash across his eyes, but I could never decide what that was and how to exploit it])—when Dad is in a good way, which, to be fair, is most of the time, he consumes books at a pace I can't understand. It's not that I don't like to read—I do—it's that Dad's reading seems less like reading and more like eating, an act fundamental to his survival. He says it has to do with the preparation for his screenwriting—"composting" is his preferred word for the process—and with two Oscar nominations and an award from the Screenwriter's Guild to his name, I guess he's onto something. I've always noticed, though, that a generous percentage of the books stacked on his desk and around his favorite easy chair concern the Devil—in whom, as I was saying, I no longer believed.

I had when I was a child. One of my earliest and most vivid memories is of a statue Dad kept on the big flat writing desk on which he hand wrote the first drafts of his screenplays hunched over, a cup of coffee at his left elbow, surrounded by an assortment of trinkets, toys, photos, and postcards —"flying buttresses to my imagination" was his phrase for what as I grew older I would think resembled an altar to a minor, idiosyncratic deity. The statue held pride of place: Francis Ford Coppola had sent it to Dad after a long and pleasant dinner conversation about a version of the Faust story that never made it past their meal; so Dad said, anyway. It was maybe eight inches high, and showed St. Michael the archangel casting the Devil out of Heaven. My Catholic friends tell me it's a familiar image, pretty much the standard representation of the event, but for me, raised in a good Presbyterian household that frowned on graven images (although, to be honest, more for their tackiness than their potential idolatry), the statue possessed an almost totemic power. Here was St. Michael, his head crowned by a gold halo like a starburst, his face tilted downward, an expression of supreme disinterest on his beatific features. His right arm was raised up over his left shoulder, as if to deliver a downward slash with the short sword it held. The left hand rested on the hip, holding a long spear almost casually. The angel's wings were as compact as his sword, and he was dressed in a white tunic overlaid with a shirt of gold chain mail. He

wore sandals with leggings that climbed almost to his knees, and he was stepping with his right foot, pinning the Devil's face underneath it.

As fascinated as I was with the figure of the warrior angel, whose weapons and armor appeared to suggest that my interest in *Conan the Barbarian* comics might be more compatible with my religious upbringing than my mother thought, I was obsessed with the representation of the Devil trapped beneath him. He was dun-colored, not black or brown but a dull combination of the two that reminded me of the smoke that poured off the bonfires Dad liked to end family parties with. His head was turned sideways, so that St. Michael's sandal mashed his left cheek and jaw, while the right side of his face was pressed into a rocky surface that I knew was Hell. His hair was short and black, his brow broken by a pair of short horns, and his eyes and mouth were open, the eyes bulging with what I took to be rage and pain, the mouth disgorging a pointed tongue as it remained locked in a never ending scream. The Devil's arms, much brawnier than St. Michael's, spread out to either side of him, the wrists circled by dull gray shackles whose chains the artist had failed to finish, so that I wasn't sure whether they were in the process of being completed, or if the Devil had broken them. He was wearing a tunic, as well, but it was dirty, almost the same smoky-color as he was, and it only covered one shoulder. The tip of the spear St. Michael carried so nonchalantly hovered over the Devil's heart. A pair of black bat wings protruded to either side of him, crushed into Hell's jagged soil by his own weight. His knees were bent, his cloven hooves pressed against the ground, as if he had not given up trying to lever himself upright. A barbed, serpentine tail wound out from under his tunic and clung to his right leg.

I studied that dark figure for what felt like hours at a time, for what must have amounted to days. Never directly: from the moment I first understood what the statue, tucked between the empty bottle of Ardbeg and the framed photograph of Devil's Rock, showed was afraid to let my gaze travel any lower than St. Michael's knee. My fear arose from an awareness that I shouldn't be so interested in the Devil, which overlay a more primitive concern that if I stared directly at him, he would notice me, and, irritated that he had been seen in such a humiliating pose, carry me off to Hell. So while I pretended to survey the other items on the desk, feigning interest in

a postcard reproduction of Matisse's *Dance* , I stole glances at the statue, taking in a shackled arm here, a rolling eye there. It wasn't that I hadn't seen representations of the Devil before. Every so often, he would pop up in the old Warner Brothers' cartoons that occupied an hour of my after-school afternoons, but that character was so stylized I understood that he was second cousin to Bugs Bunny and Daffy Duck. Dad's statue, with what I was too young to realize was its poor attempt at the Baroque, I recognized as an effort not to provoke laughter, but to show things as they actually were, which imbued it with tremendous power. Here he was, the figure my father referenced in his favorite expression, about whom my mother seemed to know an endless number of stories. The minister of our weekly church was actually rather progressive, a product of the sixties' impact on all aspects of American life, and the Devil rarely if ever made an appearance in her sermons; instead, she preferred to focus on a kind of religiously inflected guide to personal growth, sermons that were the Presbyterian equivalent of Ann Landers or Dear Abbey.

Mom, however, had been raised in a starker church, and although she claimed to despise its emphasis on sin, damnation, and the Devil, it had left her well-stocked with information, which Dad was only too happy to supplement with details drawn from his reading. "I can't imagine why you would want to know this," Mom would say, before answering whatever question I'd put to her in more depth than I would have anticipated. She never failed to end by saying, "But you're a good boy. You don't have to worry about this stuff," words that rapidly lost their power to comfort; if, indeed, they'd ever had it. From her, I learned that Hell was a lake of fire, that those condemned there were gnawed at by worms, that the Devil would eventually be bound there for good but, for the moment, was free to leave and visit Earth and, what was more, before his final imprisonment, would be allowed to rule the planet for a thousand years. Not only would it be allowed, this last part was written in the Bible itself, so it was guaranteed, by the very book the Devil was supposed to despise.

Dad expanded on Mom's information in all sorts of ways. He drew me a rough map of Dante's vision of Hell on the back of a diner menu, complete with a tiny Devil at its bottom, trapped in the lake of ice at the nadir of the great pit by the very wind his wings produced as he struggled to free

himself. (I asked him if Dante had mapped Heaven, as well; Dad said he had, but no one read that part, it was too boring.) He told me that C. S. Lewis had been of the opinion that the Devil was eternally hungry, and Hell was a place where everyone was trying to eat everyone else. (He also shared with me Lewis's idea that there were buses leaving from Hell every ten minutes to take you to Heaven, but most of the people in Hell were too self-involved to board them; but this mid-twentieth century version of Hell as a place of eternal narcissism was too out of keeping with the rest of what I'd learned to be very convincing. For that matter, what Dad told me about Sartre's *No Exit* wasn't much more compelling; although the being-trapped-in-a-room-you-couldn't-get-out-of part sounded pretty bad.) And it was Dad who quoted the lines Milton's Satan spoke to describe his condition:

Me miserable! which way shall I fly

Infinite wrath, and infinite despair?

Which way I fly is Hell; myself am Hell:

And in the lowest deep a lower deep

Still threat'ning to devour me opens wide,

To which the Hell I suffer seems a Heav'n.

Dad did his best to paraphrase and explicate the lines to me—I'm sure his former professors at Stanford would have been proud—but however precocious I was at ten, most of his commentary soared high over my head. What I took away from his words was the idea that, wherever the Devil was, that place became Hell.

2

Given such a childhood, you might assume I would have remained devout, terrified to venture far from Christianity's shelter; indeed, I doubt you would be surprised to hear my parents' education had driven me straight to the ministry. It did not. While I remained fascinated by the Devil and stories about him, which as I grew older included such books and films as *Rosemary's Baby* , *The Exorcist* , and *The Omen* , from the time I was fifteen, the tremendous fear he inspired in me ebbed; slowly at first, then all

at once, the way water drains from a bath. By my twenty-fifth birthday, it had been four years since I'd given any serious and substantial amount of time to worrying about the Devil. Really, it had been longer than that, since freshman year of college, but while researching my senior honors project, a history of the Devil in Scottish culture, all the fear I had thought long behind me resurfaced, rose up, and swallowed me whole. Since my senior year of high school, I had been prone to panic attacks that woke me in the middle of the night, shooting me out of bed and out of my room, which had shrunk to claustrophobic dimensions. When I was still in my father's house, I rushed downstairs into the living room. My one year in the UCLA dorms, I half-ran down the hall to the common room. When I was moved into my off-campus apartment, I burst into its smaller living room. As my heart hammered and my brain foamed, I paced looping circles, everything around me slightly out of focus, as if it were vibrating just enough for me to notice. Liquor and pot both helped to moderate the experience, but neither could banish it entirely, and its after-effects would extend over the next several days, leaving me fearful of lying down to sleep, with the result that I sat up on the living room or common room couch, watching late-night TV while I swam in and out of short, shallow naps.

The panic attack that took me in its jaws while I was working on my senior project and shook me like a dog with a rabbit was especially intense. I jolted awake certain that the darkness of my bedroom was the same as the darkness of unconsciousness, which was the same as the darkness visible of Hell, to which I had always already been condemned. I had been researching and writing about Calvinist predestination, a subject I had encountered as a child through my parents, Mom explaining the basics and Dad fleshing them out with his usual complement of examples. At the age of nine or ten, I found the idea that I was already consigned to Hell by a God I had done nothing (or nothing much) to offend frightening and unfair, but my parents assured me that people didn't really believe this anymore, and even if it was true, there was no way I would have been destined for the Devil's ministrations. You could tell someone was headed for Hell, Dad said, by their actions, and since mine were generally good, I was in the clear. His and Mom's words had eased my anxiety over my soul's eventual destination. Now, though, after three and a half years' experimentation with

alcohol, drugs, and girls, my father's words returned to indict me, my excesses an undeniable sign of my depravity. Mixed in with my anxiety was a kind of sick dread at my indulgences, a deep fear at how much I'd tarnished my soul, which no longer seemed a quaint abstraction, but a living part of me that was gray with rot.

Over the couch, I had hung a replica of Francis Bacon's *Painting*. It's a strange work whose background is taken up by a pair of animal carcasses, possibly cows, whose marbled flesh has been hung in a manner that suggests a crucified figure. In the foreground, there's more meat, ribs and spine on the right, a length of what might be leg on the left, both supported by slender pieces of metal forming a kind of skeletal pulpit. The middle of the picture is taken up by a man or woman whose head is mostly shadowed by the small black umbrella above it. Only its open mouth is visible, the flesh surrounding it the exhausted white of a corpse. The bulk of the figure is a black mass, with faint white smears at its center, ghostly smears that hint at but do not cohere into recognizable forms. I had first seen Bacon's painting in an Art History class whose professor had described it as post-Christian, its elements derived from the image of a Catholic priest celebrating mass, then stripped of all spiritual content, so that what you were left with was not a celebration of the Incarnation but only *carne* , meat. I wasn't qualified to judge the professor's interpretation, but the piece impressed me, and I bought a print for my living room wall. Now, wrapped in my sense, my awful surety of my inevitable damnation, which fluttered behind me like a long black cloak, I saw the painting as a prediction, a forecast of what lay in store for me on the other side of the grave reduced to its essential elements, mute suffering at the hands of a raging darkness whose square teeth were always eager for the next bite.

The only recourse left me was action. My refrigerator was packed with beer, bottles stacked and angled together like pieces of a glass puzzle; I removed them two and three at a time, lining them up on the kitchen counter. Once the fridge was beer-free, I retrieved the bottles of Absolut from the freezer and added them to the counter. I fetched the Johnny Walker Red from my bedroom, carried it to the sink, uncapped it, and turned it upside down. The strong smell of Scotch stung my nostrils as it rushed from the bottle in a long amber ribbon. I followed the Johnny Walker with the

Absolut, then opened each of the thirty-two bottles of beer and sent it frothing down the drain. My apartment alcohol-free, I rinsed the bottles and carried them to the recycling bins behind the apartment complex in three trips. There was a bag of pot in the underwear drawer of my dresser, and a couple of tabs of acid in an otherwise-empty aspirin bottle in the medicine cabinet. I flushed it all; although there was one horrifying moment when I was afraid I had clogged the toilet, which prompted a brief, paranoid fantasy that proceeded from me calling my landlord to watching the door to my cell slide closed. But before I could plunge my hand into the toilet's over-brimming bowl to attempt to loosen the clog manually, the obstruction gave and the water whirled away. Even after the drugs were gone, I had a spasm of fear wondering whether the apartments used a septic system or were part of the local sewers. This was accompanied by an all-too-vivid image of the police prying the lid from a septic tank to reveal a clump of sodden marijuana floating in the sewage that of course the cops knew was mine. No, I finally decided, the apartments were connected to the sewers. They had to be. We were in the middle of town.

Sufficiently calmed, I continued my purging of the apartment, collecting the assorted issues of *Playboy* scattered throughout my living-room and bedrooms and taking them to the recycling bins. At that time, I was between girlfriends, having lost Carol, who had been with me for the past six months, when I'd slept with Katherine, who had been supposed to be a pot-facilitated one night stand (one afternoon, actually), but who had turned into something else. For about five days, I had been, as I put it to my friends, "living the dream," seeing both of them, until Carol had arrived early at the apartment, found Katherine and me *in flagrante delicto* , and that was that for my sex life, from feast to famine. I still had most of a box of Trojans, however, a variety-pack that I'd bought in anticipation of going through in short order. I dug it out from under my bed, slam-dunked it in the garbage, pulled the garbage bag from the can, tied it off, and ran it out to the dumpster.

Back inside, I opened the phone book to the yellow pages and sought out the listing for "Churches." There was no Presbyterian Church near my off-campus apartment, but there was one fifteen minutes' drive away. I called the number and a recording told me that Sunday services were at ten a.m.. I

marked the time on my calendar and wished Sunday weren't four days off. I wanted to do more. For once, I wished I were Catholic, so that I could see a priest immediately, confess my sins, and hear that I was forgiven. I knew that, technically, I was, that all that was necessary for me to be pardoned of my sins was for me to repent them, but hearing someone tell me would have been the sort of reassurance I was looking for. As it was, I occupied myself with calling my father, who wasn't home, but whose live-in girlfriend spoke to me for forty-five minutes about her recent decision to leave her life as a Buddhist nun. I continued working on my honors project, which had gone from an ironic consideration of a culture's externalization and mythologizing of its darkest impulses to a kind of field guide to the enemy, a figure who had been standing much closer to me than I'd realized, breathing his rancid breath over me.

For the next four weeks, I attended church every Sunday—though I skipped coffee hour afterward—read the Bible attentively (especially the passages in the Gospels concerning salvation), phoned my dad more than I had since I'd come to college, and labored on my honors essay. If I thought of myself as the beneficiary of a spiritual wake-up call, if I thought of myself as "born again" (only without the tackiness), my rebirth was short-lived.

My honors project stretched to sixty pages in ten-point type and one-and-a-half line spacing, a first, and I completed it early, another first. To celebrate, I allowed my friends to take me to Mephisto's, our regular bar. I had to, I told myself. Using the honors essay as an excuse, I'd begged off going out with them for the last month. With my analysis done, I had no excuse not to accompany them. I could have told them about my new-found religiosity, but I was too self-conscious about it to do so. There was another reason for me to go: my friend, Sonya Ray, for whom I'd carried not just a torch, but a bonfire since we'd met sophomore year, had broken up with her long-term boyfriend, and was supposed to be at the bar that night. I say I allowed my friends to persuade me, but it required almost no effort on their part, and when we arrived, Sonya was already there, almost through her second margarita, and she insisted I have a margarita, too, they were delicious, and one margarita became two, and shots of Tequila followed, and conversation that trailed off into staring into one another's eyes, and then it was four in

the morning and we were tripping through the front door to her apartment, laughingly trying not to make any noise in order not to wake her roommate. We left the front door open. So overcome with alcohol and desire were we that we never reached her bedroom. We stood in the living room kissing wildly, our hands racing frantically over one another. She broke the kiss long enough to step back from me, unbutton her brown denim miniskirt, and push it and her underwear to the floor. She moved to the couch. I followed, my drunken fingers desperately trying to remember how to unbuckle my belt. My jeans and boxers around my ankles, I knelt at the edge of the couch as Sonya scooted forward to meet me. All thoughts of anything except this now gone, I slid into her. The sex was better than I had any right to expect after who-could-remember-how-many margaritas and shots, fueled in my case by two years' worth of unrequited longing. When we were done, we pulled off the rest of our clothes, which we left where we dropped them, and made our way to her bed, intending to sleep but unable not to make love again. The following morning—afternoon, really—was more pleasant than I might have feared. Sonya expressed none of the regret I feared. Quite the opposite: as it turned out, she had entertained a crush of her own for me, and was worried that I would be the one with second thoughts. Despite our hangovers, she drew me into her, and as her hips began to move faster, and she spread her legs up in the air, bringing me deeper, and I felt myself gather to release, gather to release, the fear that had clutched me the last month loosened its grip and evaporated.

3

Until the time of which I'm writing, that was it for me and the Devil. From a dark presence whose seething rage I could almost feel, the Devil sank back into words on paper, images on film. I missed church that Sunday, preferring to spend it in bed with Sonya, reading the *Times* , drinking coffee and eating the egg and cheese on hard rolls I'd bought along with the paper at the deli across the street (though I did attend for a couple of Sundays afterward). With Sonya, I felt safe, blessed, surrounded by a circle of light. However good her sermons—and they were very good, thoughtful and witty—the Minister couldn't compete. By the end of my first month with Sonya, my car stayed in its parking space Sunday mornings, which were

given over instead to distributing the *Times* on Sonya's bed and picking through the sections that interested us while we drank our coffees and tried not to leave too many crumbs on the sheets. Later, we'd go for a walk around her neighborhood, maybe take in a matinee. Until we moved in together, early the following summer, we returned to my place for dinner and to spend the night. For the first couple of weeks, we slept tangled together, the way you do when you're newly in love, and I didn't care that her hair was tickling my cheek, or that my leg had gone numb under hers. When I was lying beside her, my heart would pound as hard as it had that first night in the bar, when she'd leaned toward me, her eyes half-lidded, her lips parted ever-so-slightly, and I thought, *Oh my God, this is it*. The same combination of wonder, excitement, and fear possessed me all over again, and it would be hours until I was calm enough to sleep. In the beginning, I held onto Sonya the way, as a child, I'd held onto a toy I'd wanted for a long time and was overjoyed to have at last, and had to carry everywhere, even to bed, because of the sheer pleasure having it in my hand provided. Even after that inaugural besottedness had subsided, there were times I would wake in the middle of the night from dreams in which all this had been the dream, and I'd never come closer to Sonya than the occasional, friendly hug, but then I'd see her asleep on the pillow next to me, and for a moment, I'd be deeply confused, unsure what was real and what a figment of my desires and anxieties, and I would think, *That's right, she's here, I'm here* , and happiness would sound through me.

Happy beginnings, however, do not inevitably lead to happy endings. The first six months Sonya and I had were the high point of our time together. After that, we began a long descent that would end with me abandoning her and the train wreck our relationship had become one bright September day after she left for her graduate class. If I could have known at the outset that within six months Sonya would have started shooting heroin, and that a half dozen months later what had begun as an occasional indulgence would have progressed to a full-blown habit, which, half a year on from that, would have metastasized to addiction, would I have been able to walk away from her, accept my father's invitation to come stay with him in Santa Barbara, or live in his house in Wiltwyck, in upstate New York, for a while? Phrased this way, how could I have done anything else? Seen in retrospect, most of

our lives' complications have obvious solutions. Freed of the fog of daily existence, with its duties, doubts, and distractions, situations that appeared fraught, ambiguous, turn out to have been all along straightforward. The best explanation I can offer is that, at the time, nothing was that clear, though I wish I had a better excuse.

Trying heroin had been my idea. The guy from whom I bought my pot had come into possession of a small packet of the drug, which he said had been offered to him as payment for an outstanding debt. While at first he had been excited by his acquisition, since there was more money in dealing horse than weed, fear rapidly overtook him. For one thing, the penalties for being caught with even a little heroin were more severe than those for a comparable amount of pot; for another, the people with whom he'd have to negotiate in order to procure a steady supply of the drug were of an entirely different order from those who supplied his weed. They were *serious*—that was his word—and he was not up for serious. Indeed, he was afraid of what would happen should they learn he was holding a sample of their product. This motivated him to offer it to me at what he swore was a bargain-basement price. I said yes without hesitation, and received for my money a pack of cigarillos into which the packet had been tucked, together with a warning that, should I like the drug and want more of it, I was on my own. I said I understood and put the cigarillos in my jacket pocket.

Given that it was this action that led to Sonya's addiction, my reason for accepting the dealer's offer would seem to be of no small importance. My motivation consisted in no small part of simple curiosity. By this point, both of us had graduated UCLA. I was working as an assistant in a lawyer's office while trying to decide if I wanted to apply to law school or select another career path. Sonya had gone straight into graduate school, starting coursework for her Ph.D. in English. After graduation, we had made official what had pretty much been the case already, and she had moved in with me, the two of us taking a larger apartment in the same complex I had been resident in since my sophomore year. With Sonya, I'd returned to smoking pot on weekends. We'd dropped acid together twice: the first time we'd gazed at a budget bouquet I'd bought her at the gas station, rapt, as its flowers fell off, rushed back on, and burst into fireworks; the second time, we'd placed the tabs on our tongues just before sex, and as we moved

together, we started to float, up and away from the bed, until we were making love against the ceiling, our skins flaring bright with color. I'd had the opportunity to sample a line of coke at a party we'd attended out in Irvine, but what I knew about its effects failed to interest me, and I declined. Sonya accepted, and five minutes later we had frantic doggy-style sex in the house bathroom, after which, she threw up. Heroin was a more serious substance than I was accustomed to, particularly in its potential for addiction, but its promise of a kind of ultimate calm I found seductive in the extreme. After Sonya and I had started seeing one another, my intermittent panic attacks had kept their distance for a sufficient length of time for me to wonder if they might have departed permanently. No such luck: they had found their way back to me Wednesday night of the week she began graduate school. I had a confused notion that heroin, with its reputation for inducing profound bliss, might relieve whatever subterranean pressures fueled my panic attacks. (Sonya wanted me to see a doctor, but I was without insurance, and though my father had offered to pay any health-related bills for me, ridiculous embarrassment kept me from accepting.)

I didn't want to try the drug alone, which was why I convinced Sonya to join me. She was surprisingly reluctant. If anything, she had been the more daring of the two of us, more willing to reach for new experiences (*à la* the line of coke she'd snorted), but when it came to heroin, she reached a boundary she was leery of crossing. We debated the matter for an entire day and most of the next. Our positions weren't especially original. She was concerned about the drug's potential to enslave us. The weekend joint was one thing, she said, and even the occasional tab of acid, but this was of an entirely different order. This was wasting away to nothing while you lost contact with everyone in the world except your dealer. I accused her of being melodramatic. This wasn't crack, I said, one try wasn't going to leave us mindless junkies. How could we be sure what was in the plastic bag was heroin? she said. For all either of us knew, it could be rat poison. The same thought had crossed my mind, but I'd decided I trusted my dealer. After all, the weed he'd provided had always been of good quality. He wouldn't have sold the stuff to me if he didn't trust it himself. Sonya tore holes in that argument, and around we went, until late the next day, when I announced that I was through arguing; this was something I was going to do, and she

could join me if she wanted to. If not, no hard feelings. Truth to tell, I was more than a little afraid of sticking a needle into my arm—the sight of them approaching makes me lightheaded to the point of fainting—but my determination to follow this course of action led me to open the pack of syringes I'd bought at the pharmacy a couple of blocks away. Once she saw that I was serious about moving ahead with this, Sonya walked out of the apartment, only to return ten minutes later, as I was ransacking the dresser drawer for a belt to tie off my arm with. "This is a bad idea," she said.

As it turned out, she was right, in the short term for me, and in the long term for her. We pressed the needles into one another's veins, then lay back on the couch and waited for what was coming next. The drug hit her first. She inhaled sharply and relaxed beside me, her mouth opening and a long, "Ohhhhh," trailing out. I was turning my head to say something clever, like, "Well, I guess that means I got the rat poison," when the high overtook me. The sensation was warm, like being submerged in a hot bath, except the heat flowed from the inside out. Everything receded. Even the wonderful lassitude that filled me seemed pleasantly distant. Sonya breathed deeply, and the sound came from the other side of the Moon. There was enough time for me to think, *This is it; this is what I need* , before everything fell apart. I split—that was what it felt like. One moment, I was in, I *was* this warm liquid, the next, my brain was reeling in one direction and my body in the other. Vertigo, such as you might feel staring down the sheer side of a skyscraper, overwhelmed me, and the bliss I'd felt gave way to panic purer than I'd ever known. Rather than taking me away from the source of my anxiety attacks, the heroin had dropped me into their boiling heart. Any hope of the control I was usually able to muster over my anxiety was gone. There was only a churning fear scraping the inside of my skull raw. I was absolutely certain that the living room walls were in fact cardboard, beyond which lay nothing. Were I to tear a hole in the wall opposite me, I would find myself looking through it at the crown of my head, and if I were to turn around, I would see a hole in the wall behind me, the back of my skull visible through it. What had become of the rest of the world, of everything else, I could not say, only that it was gone. I heaved myself off the couch, and immediately fell to the floor on legs gone silly-putty. The crack of my jaw against the hardwood made stars explode in front of my eyes, but

though dulled by the heroin, the pain was a tether, something for me to hold onto. The night's meal of take-out Vietnamese slopped hot in my mouth. I crawled for the bathroom, relieved to find it still existed, only to vomit all over its floor, after which, I lay on the cool tiles, struggling to focus on one of them and so hold myself together. It was no use. The tiles surged toward me and retreated, as if I were trapped inside an enormous, ceramic heart. I wish I could say I swooned, that the awfulness went far away and then I woke, hours later, completely conscious. I had heard of people having bad trips with acid, the contents of their minds put on frightening display for them, and I'd heard of people for whom a joint was a doorway to paranoia, and I'd felt mild contempt for both those classes of user, a variety of "can't-hold-your-liquor" snobbery. I wasn't aware there could be bad heroin highs; although, how much research had I done? Those one hundred and fifty minutes—those nine thousand seconds—I spent on the bathroom floor were as close to madness as I'd come. If anything, I was standing about three feet over the sane-insane line on the wrong side. Even after the worst of the experience was over, I lay where I was, too harrowed to move.

No one I spoke to subsequently about my reaction to the drug could believe it: not Sonya, who wandered into the bathroom the next morning after having drifted from the deep calm of the drug to an equally deep sleep; or my dealer, whom I had to restrain myself from strangling the next time I ran into him; or Alan, my downstairs neighbor, who had lived, as he put it, a varied life, and who seemed to have done a little bit of everything. "Maybe it has to do with your anxiety attacks," he suggested, which was sufficiently ironic to strike me as the probable answer. "Oh well, at least you tried it," Sonya said, which I found less than comforting.

She remained tight-lipped about her own experience of the drug, in part, I knew, because mine had been so abysmal, but also, I suspected, because hers had surpassed her expectations, making her objections appear, in retrospect, absurd. Had my high been less catastrophic, I would have pressed her for further details. As it was, I contented myself with her, "It was… pleasant. Very, very pleasant." I assumed that was the end of our experiment with heroin, and there was nothing more to discuss.

Near the very end of our relationship, when we were both finding every excuse to stay away from the apartment, whose overflowing garbage pail,

sink full of crusted dishes, and general disarray constituted an almost painfully obvious symbol of what things between us had degenerated to, there was a night Sonya finally told me, at length, the story of her slide into addiction. We were sitting in the Greek restaurant two streets from our place, to which we'd been brought by the rare coincidence of our individual good moods. By then, Sonya was a poster child for the ravages of heroin. She had lost about thirty pounds, not enough to make her truly skeletal, but sufficient to strip the soft curves of her face to a series of sharp planes. Her skin was the pale, unhealthy color of spoiled milk, and her eyes were sunken, black-rimmed, restless. She favored long-sleeved shirts, although it was late July and southern-California hot. Her personality had been stripped, too, its contours smoothed into stark, straight lines of need. I wouldn't say the night was just like old times, because it wasn't, not close. I don't know if I already had left her in my heart and mind; though if I hadn't, my departure was imminent. But the conversation we had was ghost enough of the ones we'd used to fill the hours with for me to feel the dull blade of nostalgia sawing my chest. I had asked her how this had happened to her, how she'd gone so far, on numerous occasions: when I'd found the syringes and bag of heroin secreted inside the hollowed-out *Norton Shakespeare* under her side of the bed; when she'd returned to the apartment after three days during which she disappeared without a trace and did not answer her cell phone; when I'd opened the door one Saturday morning, after she hadn't come home from a late-night study session the previous night, and found her slumped against the corridor outside, her breathing shallow, the left side of her face stained by a large bruise. Each time, Sonya had refused to answer me, preferring evasions such as, "You don't want to hear about it," or, "You should know: you're the one who got me started on this," which I in turn met with defensiveness and anger, which sparked further arguments lasting for days, a week.

This time, however, she raised the subject in response to some inane remark I'd uttered, and as the server brought my gyro platter and her Greek salad, and then my baklava, and then our coffees, she told me her story, the hidden narrative that had cast its lengthening shadow over the last two years of our time together. For that night, it was as if we'd gone full circle and returned to the way things used to be, before we'd gotten together, when we

would meet for lunch, dinner, or dessert, and she would spill her problems to me and I would spill mine to her. As I'd suspected, she had liked her first shot of heroin much more than she'd expected, or been willing to admit. "No offense," she said as she picked at her salad, "but it was better than sex—so much better, like a thousand times." I let the comment go and she continued.

From the start, she'd wanted to do it again, but at that point she'd still been nervous enough about the possibility of becoming a junkie to tell herself that she didn't dare. A couple of months later, we'd been at a party in Long Beach, and a friend of the host's had offered her a chance to try the drug a second time. (Where was I? I couldn't recall.) She had accepted instantly, and only afterwards, when the high had declined and she was asking herself what she had done, all the while feeling the need for a third dose, had she tried to reassure herself that, after all, two months had passed since the last time she'd used, which was obviously proof she was in control of this. And for the next few months, she had more or less succeeded in continuing to exercise that control, although, initially, her restraint owed itself to the fact that a) she didn't know where to go to find more heroin (I was the one who procured the bags of pot and while she'd met my dealer, she was concerned that, if she approached him on her own, word might get back to me) and b) to a lesser extent, she was more afraid than ever of the precipice at whose edge she saw herself swaying.

Despite her fear, she found another three occasions to use during that time, at the end of which, she decided that things weren't working for her this way. She was spending too much energy navigating between her desire for more heroin and her terror at the need. It made more sense for her to shoot up regularly than it did for her to continue in this fashion. If she could keep on a strict schedule, then she would be able to satisfy her want for that deep pleasure while allaying her dread of being taken over by it. For the next half a year, she almost succeeded at her plan. She would inject herself early on Friday afternoons, when she was off from school and I was at work. The most immediate effect of the high was past by the time I unlocked the front door. (How had I failed to notice?) Through the guy who'd provided her second shot of heroin, she found a reliable dealer, and that was her set. "I can't tell you," she said, pushing a tomato around with her fork, "what a

relief it was to come to this decision. It was like, the best of both worlds." Gradually, though, her once-a-week high became less satisfying, until she had to supplement it with a second dose, which she snuck late Tuesday, after I'd gone to sleep. By the six-month anniversary of her decision to start using, Sonya was seeing her dealer every two to three days. Since she was in charge of our joint bank account, it wasn't difficult for her to finance her addiction. (Not until about a week before this meal would I learn that the thousands I was sure were earning interest had vanished, pushed out the ends of a line of disposable syringes.) She couldn't believe it had taken me so long to catch on to what was happening to her. The time I confronted her after discovering her stash inside the empty Shakespeare, she had been convinced there was no way I would accept her explanation that she only did heroin once in a great while. Some part of her hoped I would see through the lie and force her to seek treatment. Since I didn't, since I frowned and said well, if she was sure she could handle it, she knew that she wasn't going to have to stop doing this, that I was not going to pose a serious obstacle to her. She had been amazed at her ability to deceive me, not to mention, my gullibility.

Hearing her speak, seeing the missing pieces to the puzzle of the last two years finally pressed into place and the entire picture made clear, I was no less astounded at my blindness. Under other circumstances, my embarrassment would have given way to anger, but on this night, my humiliation and outrage were held in check by the sight of that picture, made complete. Over dessert, Sonya gave me a quick synopsis of the last several months, which she described as "standard *Trainspotting* fare." There was no doubt she was an addict. The drug was pretty much all she thought about. When she wasn't high, she was counting the hours until she could be, and by the end of the latest high, she was already anticipating the next. The only time she was satisfied was the first moment after the needle had found the vein and the heroin was snaking its way through her system, easing her into that bliss that never lasted long enough. She supposed she wasn't as bad as some junkies she'd encountered. She was still attending her grad classes, which she was able to get through—if barely—without being high; although that was by promising herself a fix when she got home. She wasn't like the people she'd seen lying on filthy mattresses in filthy apartments in

their own filth. “I’m a more upscale junkie,” she said, which made us both laugh. For a moment, sharing in her joke, I felt closer to Sonya than I had in months, maybe the last year. As I finished the last of my baklava, she said, “So now you understand why I was so insistent about the abortion.”

My dessert stuck in my throat. About the time Sonya’s drug use had shifted from habit to addiction, she had started to feel sick. At first, she thought it might be the heroin, that she’d bought a tainted batch. Afraid she might have poisoned herself, she succeeded in halting her use for a white-knuckle week. When the sickness persisted, she spoke to a fellow student who was a nurse, who heard her symptoms and told her to buy a pregnancy test. Right away, she knew that was the answer. “It was too big a disaster not to be,” she said. But she purchased the test anyway, and then had its positive reading confirmed at Planned Parenthood two days later. She didn’t tell me until the results had been double-checked, by which time she’d scheduled the appointment to have the pregnancy terminated.

That was how she presented the situation to me: she was pregnant, but it was okay, she was taking care of it. I hadn’t been completely surprised by the news. From the first night we’d slept together, we’d played Russian roulette often enough that our luck was pretty much bound to run out. I couldn’t say I particularly wanted to be a father, but I wasn’t completely averse to the idea, either. Our discussions of what we might do in such an eventuality hadn’t progressed much beyond, “Let’s hope it doesn’t happen.” We were both pro-choice, but I thought of it as an option, not an inevitability, and I was taken aback by the speed with which Sonya had made up her mind. We’d had—not an argument, exactly, but a pretty heated debate, which came down to her saying she wasn’t ready for this and it was, after all, her body. I was surprised at how unhappy I was with her decision, but I couldn’t see what else I could do except abide by it and offer what support I could. I had long accepted, and argued, that the bad of abortion was necessary to prevent the greater bad of unwanted children. Having to live my words, however, proved a challenge I did not anticipate. In the two weeks before Sonya returned to Planned Parenthood, I kept asking her if she was sure, if there wasn’t some other way out of this for us. No, she said, there wasn’t, and the absolute certainty of her answer only made me press the question harder. By the time of the procedure, she had decided she

didn’t want me to accompany her; instead, she asked Sarah, her nurse friend, to accompany her past the protesters. Afterward, she spent the remainder of that day and all the next in bed, asleep or lying quietly. I brought her glasses of water and asked her if she was hungry, if there was anything I could get her, but all she wanted was to rest.

“This was why I had to go through with it,” she said, as the server set her cup of coffee in front of her. She wasn’t ready for a child in the best of circumstances, and under this one, what other option did she have? She’d already been using when she was pregnant. If that hadn’t damaged the fetus, then just wait, because there was no way she was not going to keep shooting up during the remainder of the pregnancy. And that was a situation she wanted no part of. Better to end things as soon as possible than engage in a long, drawn-out process tantamount to torture. Although it was all in the past, I almost argued the point with her, almost said, “What about trying to stop? What about trying to get clean? What about telling me the truth and us seeing what we could do about this together, as a couple?” but I restrained myself. I thought I knew what she’d answer: “What if I didn’t think I could stop using? What if I wasn’t sure I wanted to?” and anyway, what was done was done. *Let it go* , I told myself.

After dinner was over, the tab paid, we walked back to the apartment. Sonya took my arm. “What comes next?” I asked her.

“I don’t know,” she said. “I have to admit, I’m starting to wish I could quit using.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. The high is great, don’t get me wrong—it’s still incredible—but all the other stuff—what it’s done to me, what it’s done to us—that’s pretty hard to bear. It’s a cliché, but I’m at the point I’m sick and tired of feeling sick and tired, you know? I see some of the people who’ve been doing this longer than I have, these men and women like ghosts—specters, I call them, heroin specters—and I know it won’t be long before I’m one of them. Maybe I am, already. It’s—I’m afraid. I mean, really, truly frightened of what trying to quit would be like. I can imagine what being clean would be like, because I used to be, and it wasn’t that long ago, I just can’t imagine how to get there.”

“There are people you could talk to—people who do this for a living, professionals.”

“Yeah. I just don’t know how to do it.”

“I could help you.”

She stopped walking. “Are you serious?”

“Of course. Why wouldn’t I be?”

“I assumed—after everything I told you—I kind of figured that was it for us.”

“Never assume,” I said. “If you want to do this, I want to help you.”

“I can’t believe this,” she said, her eyes filling with tears. “I can’t believe you.”

“Believe,” I said. At the moment, I meant it.

4

Two days later, I left.

After calling in sick to my job, I had spent the previous morning engaged in a massive clean of the apartment, emptying the refrigerator of tubs of moldy leftovers and carrying the garbage bags out to the dumpster, subjecting the dishes piled in the sink to blistering hot water and the attentions of a Brillo pad, cleaning the bathroom with Lysol and Comet, sweeping the floor, and generally tidying the place. As I scrubbed, hands growing raw from my failure to pull on the rubber gloves under the sink, I felt myself wavering, caught between two courses of action that were opposite and irreconcilable. In one, I continued as I was, remained with Sonya as she attempted to come to grips with her addiction, working to unsnarl the tangle our lives had become and smooth it into a shape we might continue to inhabit. In the other, I fled, abandoned my girlfriend and our life together for… I didn’t know what, someplace else. The first prospect was crushing, the second terrifying. I had switched on the radio, which was tuned to KUSC, in search of a soundtrack for my cleaning, some European symphony from the nineteenth century whose ebbing and flowing notes would distract me from the choices facing me. The host announced a treat for his listeners, the “anti-anti-opera” from the Hungarian composer,

György Ligeti, *Le Grand Macabre* , which he would be playing for the next two hours in its entirety, uninterrupted. With the exception of the excerpt Kubrick had used in *2001* , I wasn't familiar with Ligeti's music, but I was curious to hear it. After beginning with a brass arrangement meant to imitate car horns, the piece moved to voices with minimal instrumental support, dueting sopranos succeeded by a single tenor whose song became stuck in a repeated laugh. Another tenor joined the first. I couldn't make out what language the singers were using (Hungarian?), but at one point, I was certain I heard the first tenor exclaim, "Now we are fucked!" Later, the orchestra erupted in a frantic mix of horns and strings over a tumult of drums. Rather than a diversion, the music had become an illustration of my emotions, violins, trumpets, and drums twisting around and crashing into one another, until at last I switched the radio off.

During the afternoon, I researched treatment options online and called various facilities, finally settling on an outpatient clinic that wasn't too far, that could fit Sonya in with an appointment for next week, and that, most importantly, was willing to accept her graduate student insurance. A trip to the supermarket restocked the fridge with pre-made salads, containers of hummus and bags of pita bread, a whole roasted chicken. I stripped our bed, gathered the sheets with the rest of the laundry that had accumulated, and went to the laundromat, where I phoned my dad while a trio of large washers churned my and Sonya's washing. He always sounded pleasantly surprised to hear from me, which I never could decide how much to believe, but today found comforting. "You coming to see me?" he said, the question with which he began all our conversations, and to which I usually replied with some variation on, "I can't right now: I'm too busy with school, work, whatever." This time, however, I said, "Actually, I wanted to ask you about the Wiltwyck place."

"What about it?"

"Is anyone staying there?" Sometimes friends of his would use the house for a week or two.

"Not at the moment. Why? Looking to take your girlfriend on a romantic getaway?"

"No."

In that single syllable, he heard enough to say, “Ah, I see. Is it bad?”

“Yeah.”

“Do you want me to drive down?”

For a long moment, I wanted to say yes, to turn everything over to him and ask him to fix it for me, the way he used to when I was a child. Eyes brimming, voice thick, I said, “That’s okay. I just—I need to put some distance between us.”

“Like, an entire continent.”

“Yeah.”

“Are you okay for money? How will you get there?”

“I have enough for the moment. I planned on driving. I figure I can make it in about five days, maybe sooner.”

“You’re sure you don’t want me to come there? I could pick you up, we could go together.”

“It’s okay,” I said. “Thanks, but that isn’t necessary.”

“All right,” he said, the tone of his voice saying it wasn’t. He gave me the number for the property manager. “Call her when you arrive. I'll phone ahead and tell her to expect you.”

“Will do,” I said. “And Dad? Thank you.”

Until I heard myself saying it, I had not been absolutely certain I was leaving. The instant the words left my mouth, I felt such a swell of relief that I knew this was exactly what I was going to do. By the time I returned to the apartment with my car full of warm laundry, Sonya was back from school, so I had to wait until she was asleep to pack my bag. In the hours between, I told her about the treatment center I’d found and set her up with, and in which she expressed cautious interest. We discussed possibly calling her parents, who lived outside Portland and to whom she spoke intermittently at most. She was surprised by my full-scale clean of the apartment, my replenishing the refrigerator, and the faintest trace of doubt flickered across her face, but I said it would help her with the changes she was planning if she didn’t have all this other stuff to worry about, which was true, as far as it went, but significantly incomplete. My imminent departure, I did not mention.

I went the following morning, waiting until Sonya had been away a couple of hours to minimize the chances of her returning and catching me. The last thing I did, once I had carried my bag to my car, was deactivate my e-mail accounts and cancel my cell-service. Sonya still had my dad's number, but I was reasonably confident he would play dumb as to my location. Beyond its general location, I couldn't remember exactly how much I'd told Sonya about the house in Wiltwyck, but it seemed to me it was too little for her to drive to the front door. On my way out, I placed my keys to the building and our apartment on the kitchen table, which I figured would announce my departure as well as any self-justifying letter I might leave.

What the keys' scalloped lengths couldn't do was explain the reason I walked to my car, climbed into it, and headed for the I-10 now, when it seemed Sonya had made or was about to make the breakthrough for which I had been increasingly desperate this past year. Though it did not cause me to turn around, the question dogged me as I took 10 to 15, which I followed northeast out of California into Nevada, through reaches of sand speckled with green and brown scrub, overseen by distant mountains whose peaks cut a jagged shape out of the horizon. I skirted Las Vegas, which Sonya had always wanted to visit but at which I had turned up my nose, citing my father's opinion that Vegas was what you got when people incapable of imagination gave you their version of paradise. I 15 brought me to Utah via the northwest corner of Arizona. By now, the sun was a crimson furnace at the bottom of the sky.

After a night of poor sleep at a rest area, I continued a vigorous conversation with myself about my motivations as I turned onto 70 and drove east into Colorado's mountains. In Denver, I picked up 76, which led me into Nebraska, the western part of which was more arid than I had expected. From 76, I took 80 through Omaha, the land to either side of the highway steadily greening, to Iowa, where my sleep was much better at a Motel 6 in Des Moines. Already, I had driven farther than ever before, almost two-thirds of the way across the United States, and when I lay on the motel bed, I had the sensation I was still hurtling forward. And yet, even as unconsciousness rose around me, I was overcome by the sense that I hadn't traveled any distance whatsoever, that were I to turn over, I would find Sonya asleep beside me. I understood this was a manifestation of the

ongoing argument I was having with myself, which earlier in the day had become so vigorous that a Nebraska state trooper, positive that he had caught me talking on my cell while I was driving, had pulled me over, and it had taken me showing him there was no cell phone anywhere within my car to convince him this was not the case. All the same, I could have sworn I felt Sonya's weight pressing the mattress at my back, until I had to check to verify my solitude.

Early the third day, as I departed Iowa for Illinois, rounding the southern tip of Lake Michigan, and continuing to Indiana and Ohio beyond, I weighed taking the next exit and reversing my course, speeding back to LA, where I hoped Sonya had not taken my exit as a prompt to abandon her plan to quit her drug use. Grief dark and deep as the ocean floor weighted me, flooded my eyes with tears I kept wiping away. I recited what already had become the litany justifying my departure, a tally of the disruptions Sonya's addiction had caused to our lives combined with platitudes about self-care. It did nothing to assuage my sorrow, all concentrated in the single statement I could hear Sonya uttering: "You betrayed me." Convinced as I was of those words' truth—which encompassed a range of actions beginning with me insisting she try the heroin, too, and ending with me fleeing cross-country—consumed by shame and sorrow at them, I nonetheless maintained my eastward direction, leaving 80 for 90 west of Cleveland. I had hoped to complete the journey that day, and had purchased a basic cell phone at a large truck stop in anticipation of calling my father's property manager to inform her of my imminent arrival in Wiltwyck. By the time I crossed the northwest corner of Pennsylvania into New York, however, my eyelids had grown dangerously heavy, and I decided it was safer to find a motel and finish my trip the next day. East of Buffalo, I checked in at another Motel 6, which shared a parking lot with a Denny's at which my growling stomach insisted I have a late-night meal. I left a message on the property manager's phone to expect me the following afternoon, then walked across the pavement, that still-driving sensation causing me to feel as if an enormous hand were pushing me toward the restaurant's glowing windows.

Inside, I ordered a mug of decaf, hoping the taste and smell would fool my body into remaining awake long enough for me to eat the large breakfast I

requested along with it, while not preventing me from falling asleep upon my return to the motel. I had reached that stage of tired when everything around you appears to be turning ever-so-slightly, as if you're on a merry-go-round slowing to a halt—or gathering momentum. With no smart phone, I was without the usual means of distraction as I waited for my eggs and ham, so I sipped my decaf and surveyed my fellow late-night customers. If some contemporary Edward Hopper wanted to paint an updated version of *Nighthawks* , he could do worse than bring his sketch pad to a booth at a place such as this. College age, the hostess kept returning to her station and her phone, the rapid-fire motion of her thumbs on its screen together with the scowl on her face evidence of an ongoing and likely unpleasant exchange with at least one other person. Two waitresses served a clientele consisting of equal parts long-haul truckers and college students, the former seated alone, their baseball caps tipped forward over their phones, the latter in groups of between two and five, their murmurs punctuated by occasional laughter. The waitress who took my order was a few years older than I was, her acne-scarred face caked with makeup, her hair dyed magenta, the fingers of her right hand stacked with silver rings. Her coworker was roughly the same age, wearing large round glasses, her dirty-blond hair pulled tight into a ponytail. A few other customers populated the restaurant: a pair of youngish men whose crew cuts, white dress shirts and black ties marked them as either missionaries or traveling salesmen, and an older man wearing a rumpled white leisure suit, a wrinkled white dress shirt, and a pair of polished red leather shoes. These last caught my attention. In the restaurant's soft light, they shone like the surfaces of candy apples. Their laces were black. Neither the man's suit nor his shirt appeared of similar quality, which seemed odd. His long face was lined, his nose bulbous, his pale hair receded most of the way to the crown of his pink head, his chin sliding into a neck that was a collection of loose flesh. His eyes were rheumy, unfocused, puffy bags under them. Had my hypothetical Hopper been painting this particular sample of late-night patrons, he might have placed this man off to one corner, knowing as he did that his viewers' eyes would be drawn irresistibly to his shoes, those splashes of red like blood fresh on the canvas. I tried not to stare at them, or at least to be discrete, but fatigue dulled my manners. It took me a long time to register that he had

seen me staring at him and was peering at me, his expression studious; the moment I did, I looked away, my cheeks burning.

When my meal arrived, I wolfed it down, hunger adding flavor to the salty ham and watery eggs. After the waitress removed my plate, I declined her offer of the dessert menu and requested the check. While she was preparing it, I leaned my head against my seat and closed my eyes. The table jolted, startling me. I assumed the waitress had collided with it, but I opened my eyes to the man with the red shoes sliding into the seat across from me. He smelled awful, a stench like week-old egg salad left out in the hot sun, a choking blend of vinegar and sulfur, underneath which was a faint musty odor. He struck his right elbow against the edge of the table as he placed his hands on its surface, palms down.

"Excuse me?" I said.

"You were looking at my shoes," he said, his low voice thick with phlegm.

There was no point denying it. I had seen him watching me. "I was," I said. "They're something else."

He beamed. "The secret is in the material. The right one is the soul of that cardinal—what was his name? You know, the one in Boston, who protected all the pedophiles. No? I suppose it's not important. I doubt you're familiar with the fellow I'm wearing on my left foot. He ran the security services in South Africa when apartheid was the law of the land. The thing with these kinds of sinners is, their souls are both tough and flexible. It's the self-righteousness. Makes for footwear that lasts forever—well, maybe not that long, but a pair of shoes like these will let me walk up and down the Earth a good few times."

What response to offer this, I had no idea. Either the man was making an elaborate joke, punning on soles and souls, or he was mentally ill, and I was too tired, too drained in all ways—physically, mentally, spiritually—to deal with him. I settled for, "Huh. That's… interesting. I'm sorry to be rude, but I've been on the road all day, and I really need some sleep." The waitress hadn't brought my check yet, but I could ask for it at the front register. I went to slide out of my seat.

With a sentence, the man stopped me: "I'll be sure to tell Sonya you said hello."

My throat tightened. “I beg your pardon?”

“She knew,” he said. “The second she saw the keys lying on the table, she *knew*. She told herself she was wrong, but it was no use. Everything you had done the previous day—well, it was obviously the gesture of someone preparing to leave, to abandon her, attempting to assuage his already guilty conscience by ensuring there was enough cottage cheese in the refrigerator and the toilet was clean. She was angry, oh so angry. Of all the times for you to throw up your hands and say, ‘This is it, I’ve had enough,’ you had to pick now, when she had told you she wanted to change? *Fine* , she thought, *fine*. She called her dealer. She had deleted his number from her phone, but of course she remembered it. She drove to his house, to the needle he had waiting for her. You would assume he knew what he was doing when he prepared it, which raises the possibility that what happened next was his fault. He led her to his den, where he passed her the syringe. In general, he didn’t allow the people who purchased his product to use it in his residence, but for such a long-term, steady customer as Sonya, he was willing to make an exception. On his leather couch, she injected herself. She relaxed. Her breathing slowed. Her pulse, which had been pounding since she saw your keys, finally calmed. And then she died.”

Mouth dry, I said, “Who are you?”

As if he hadn’t heard me, the foul-smelling man continued. “Right away, the dealer saw that she was gone. After checking her pulse to be certain, he pulled her onto the floor and began administering CPR. Which would seem to indicate he wasn’t responsible for her demise; although who knows? Maybe he panicked. Either way, he succeeded in restarting Sonya’s heart. She remained unconscious, unresponsive, so he carried her to her car and sped off to the nearest emergency room. He brought her into the hospital, shouting that he needed help, there was something wrong with his girlfriend. It was very dramatic. Once the nurses took Sonya and laid her on a stretcher, he said he had to park her car and fled. He drove to the other side of the city, to a scrapyard where another of his regulars was employed. In exchange for a month’s free supply of his drug of choice—OxyContin—this fellow agreed to feed Sonya’s car to the compactor. In its trunk, the dealer placed Sonya’s purse and phone, the things with the potential to

identify her. He stayed to watch the car being crushed—he was thorough—after which, his customer drove him home.

"Sonya, though, was dead. Oh, her heart continued to labor, but her brain was dark, her soul fled.

"To me."

Momentarily, I was certain the man facing me was a private investigator retained by Sonya's parents to locate me—which certainty yielded to another, that he was a member of a more sinister profession, a leg-breaker or hitman hired to punish the person they held responsible for their daughter's condition. Which made no sense. Sonya's parents had no way of knowing anything about the situation the man had described. Indeed, he had specifically mentioned Sonya's dealer destroying her ID. There would be no clue the staff at whatever hospital she was in could use to ascertain her identity, and therefore know whom to contact. Unless this man had been commissioned by her dealer: who knew exactly what she had said to him during her call and subsequent visit to his house? Everyone who had ever supplied me with illicit substances had displayed more than a little paranoia. Perhaps something Sonya had mentioned to her supplier had prompted him to tamper with the needle he prepared for her, and to set a contract killer on my trail. Except—how had this foul-smelling man found me? Had my car been tampered with at some point, a tracking device secreted on it? When? There had been no time. My insight made no sense. Yet despite his appearance, the red, flaking skin of his cheeks, the clumps of dandruff beading his hair, the man radiated menace, an evil simultaneously all-encompassing and deeply personal, zeroed in on me like the laser sight of a rifle whose trigger his index finger was quivering to squeeze. Would he attempt anything here? The restaurant seemed too crowded for any obvious act of violence; not to mention, the man's hands were clearly visible on the tabletop. Was this some kind of contract-killer ritual, a formal notice to his target of the reason for their imminent demise? Would what was starting here conclude in the parking lot, or my motel room? Or would he force me to chauffeur him to a spot where my body would not be found?

Interrupting my reverie, the man said, "She's behind you."

“Who?” I glanced over my shoulder, but the seat was one of those high ones designed for privacy, and I couldn’t see anything.

“Who have we been talking about? You are tired—or stupid. It would appear the jury’s still out on that one.”

“Sonya?”

“You were paying attention.”

“But you said—she died.”

“That I did. I also said her soul departed her body, whence it came into my possession.”

“I don’t understand.”

“I think you do,” the man said. “You understand everything I’ve said. It’s more a case of, you’re having trouble accepting it—believing it. Which, to be fair, is usually the case.”

He was correct. I swallowed. “You can’t be serious.”

“Why don’t you have a look in the next booth, and you can decide how serious I am.”

I turned, hesitated, wondering if this was a trick to distract me from the killing blow.

“Go on,” the man said. “I’ll stay right where I am.”

The problem was, since he had said Sonya was behind me, I had had the distinct impression of someone in the adjoining booth, seated back-to-back with me. The sensation could have been no more than a species of low-level hypnosis, my fatigued brain responding to the guilt and horror the man’s story had evoked in me by conjuring a presence where there was none; or, more simply, what I was picking up on could have been the sounds of a person who had no connection to any of this enjoying a late-night meal. One eye on the foul-smelling man, I scooted to the edge of my seat and leaned into the aisle, craning my neck to peak at the diner to my rear as surreptitiously as possible.

Only to rocket away from what I saw, sliding all the way to the opposite end of my seat, thumping my head against the plate glass window. On the far side of the booth behind me, I had seen the same man seated across from

me. Everything about this other man was identical to the one who had told me he held Sonya's soul, from his crumpled white jacket, to the creases in his white dress shirt, to the thinning hair clinging to his pink scalp, to the watery eyes with which he regarded me, to his hands outspread on the table. So startled was I by his appearance that I only saw the right arm of the person with him, which was also resting on the table. The silver bracelet encircling the wrist might have been the one Sonya favored (and which I had given her our first Christmas together), but I hadn't seen it for enough time to be sure. There was no way I was going back for a second look; my heart was striking the inside of my chest with such force it hurt.

"Well?" the man said.

Desperate, I searched for the waitress, but she was nowhere to be found. In fact, with the exception of the pair I had glimpsed in the adjacent booth, the restaurant was empty. What was more, the other booths appeared curiously flat, two-dimensional, as if they were part of a large painting, cunningly executed. I checked the window I was pressed against, but there was nothing except darkness visible beyond it. "Who are you?" I said.

"Are we still playing this game?" he said, his voice full of bad humor.

"There's no way—"

"'Every man meets the Devil once before he dies,'" the man said. "Isn't that how Great-great-uncle Michael's saying goes?"

"Yes, but—I don't believe in the Devil. Or God—any of it."

"What difference does that make to me?"

"I just—I mean, why would the Devil want to bother with me?"

"Why would I want to bother with any of you?" the man said. "You're disgusting, vile blends of *pneuma* and this," the man raised his hands, curling his lips at the scabs on his knuckles, the cracked and yellowed nails at the ends of his fingers, "this dross, this excrement." He lowered his arms. "I never understood the rationale for your creation," he said. "No, that isn't true. I knew what Yahweh was after, attempting to use the spark to elevate the filth, trying to use the filth to alter the spark, make it mutable. I found the entire concept disgusting, *repugnant*. It was a good part of the reason for our… altercation. *You* are the reason for this," the man said, brought

back from his memory, pressing his hands against his shirt, “every last one of you *mongrels*. You can never know what you cost me, what I lost because of *you*.”

“Paradise,” I said. Despite my hammering heart, I could not believe—no, as the man had said, I could not accept this. Was it possible I was dreaming? At any moment, would I feel a hand shaking me and open my eyes to the waitress bending over me? I had experienced vivid dreams in the past, the kind so real that waking at first doesn’t break their spell; although I could not recall a dream which had featured such a pungent smell. More likely, I was experiencing a psychotic break, the consequence of my supercargo of guilt. I seemed remarkably lucid for someone whose mind was sundering, but perhaps this was not unusual. The prospect of my mind fracturing was terrible, though compared to the alternative, that I was in the midst of a conversation with the Devil himself, infinitely preferable.

“Godhood,” the man said. “Yahweh likes to insist it’s him alone, but we were all gods, possessors of power and wisdom and beauty beyond compare. That should have been enough for any being. It was for *me*. But Yahweh was ever the artist, ever restless to create something new, fascinated by possibility. I humored him, went along with his plans, helped him with the framework for the cosmos he wanted to bring into being. I *indulged* him, the way you might help an older brother put together a fish tank or terrarium. I always knew material life was in his plans, but honestly, the odds against its developing were high, so *incalculably* high, I wasn’t concerned. Perhaps a few single-celled organisms might evolve on a few million planets. I assumed that would be enough for him. The math, though —he did something with the equations, tampered with them. He must have, because his universe exploded with life. Evolution kicked in, and in no time at all, the cosmos was filled with an abundance of complex, multi-cellular creatures. Its variety wasn’t to my taste, but it pleased Yahweh, occupied him, so I was happy to leave him to it. Only when he proposed sharing the *pneuma* , the spark, with certain of the results of his experiment did I realize things had gone too far. Or, that this had been his intent from the start. Its perversity sickened me. Its presumption offended me. The *pneuma* didn’t belong to him; he couldn’t use it whatever way he fancied. It was *ours* , our common treasure, not to be wasted on an assortment of *animals*. He

insisted, as did I. Many of our company stood with me, but not enough for the inevitable conflict, the war. More math: Yahweh's numbers were superior to mine. I lost, and as a consequence was cast out."

The man's eyes had lost their focus, as if he were reciting a story gone stale with repetition. Its details were slightly different, but the overall outline of the narrative was familiar. "Into Hell," I said.

"Into here," the man said, sweeping his right arm to take in our flattened, our stage-set surroundings, "into this prison of matter, of contingency and change, of disease and decay." His gaze locked on me. "You cannot appreciate how *small* this place is, how *confining*. No doubt, Yahweh thought he was educating me, allowing me the opportunity to know his cosmos from the inside-out, but all he did was to reinforce my sentiments. I walked up and down this universe. I sought out his *science experiments* , his *hybrids* , on this world and on a million million others. I observed them. I interacted with them. Nothing I saw persuaded me any of my original reservations had been mistaken. Instead, it made me angrier. I had been exiled for *you* ? I set about demonstrating the error of Yahweh's ways to him. It wasn't difficult. No matter the differences in your outward appearances, you creatures are easy to corrupt, to twist. You *long* for it. Really, it's more of a surprise when one of you demonstrates something that might pass for virtue. You proved Yahweh's point, the *pneuma* can be affected by the actions of its material tether. It can be warped, made to turn on itself, so that once its attachment to its host is severed, it remains stationary, rather than seeking to rejoin its source. I gathered these misshapen sparks and examined them. I interviewed and interrogated them; I dissected them, stitched them back together and cut them apart again. I found some similarities among the types of distortions they displayed, which led me to categorize them. I experimented with them, exploring the uses I could make of them."

"Your shoes," I said.

"Shoes, socks, suit, shirt, and underwear." The man grinned sourly. "Not to mention, breakfast, lunch, and dinner, plus the occasional snack."

"You eat people?"

“I consume *pneuma* ,” the foul-smelling man said. “Though that isn’t completely accurate. The spark can’t be eaten in that sense. However, it can be contained and its power harnessed.”

“Everyone—all the damned are inside you?”

He nodded. “Don’t act so surprised. As I recall, you’ve spent a fair amount of time studying me, representations of me. Surely you remember the images of Hell as a great fiery mouth.”

“They’re all still conscious?”

“You could say that.”

“What about the other devils? What’s their part in this?”

“I ate them first.” The man waved his hand. “You know what I mean.”

“Why? They were on your side, weren’t they?”

“They were. All the more reason to add their strength to mine.”

“Is that your plan,” I said, “to accumulate enough power for what? a rematch with God?”

The man’s brows lowered. “I’m not sure I care for your tone,” he said. From under the floor, a sound like huge gears clashing together trembled the table.

“I’m sorry,” I said, putting my hands up. “I don’t mean to be disrespectful. I just don’t understand.”

“That’s obvious.” The scraping noise subsided. “The advantage Yahweh has over me is the *pneuma*. It responds to him in a way it does no one else. It’s the first contradiction, the self-renewing source. A few of my duller colleagues insisted it was the same as Yahweh, which is absurd. Regardless, he is equipped with superior force. However, it’s a power from which he continually peels off flakes to graft onto his multitude of creations. He’s sprinkling batteries across his cosmos for anyone to pick up, has been for—for an eternity, now. I’m not yet the strength I was of old, but I’m not far off it. By the time I regain my former state, I’ll already be in the process of surpassing it.”

“Does God know you’re doing this?”

“It would be difficult for Yahweh not to, assuming he’s been paying attention to me, which I guarantee you he has.”

“Aren’t you worried he’ll stop you?”

“He hasn’t made any moves in that direction thus far. I admit, I would not care to face him in my current state—though I am not as he once knew me. In the billions of years since we clashed, I have become a cosmos, myself. Yahweh might find me more of a challenge than he anticipates.”

“Is this why we’re having this conversation?” I said. “So you can tell me what I have to look forward to?” A thought occurred to me: “Did you talk to Sonya? What did you say to her?”

“I did,” the man said. “In the end, I think I speak with most of you; enough for your great-great-uncle’s words to be largely true. The results of my conversations are generally disappointing, but once in a while, I encounter someone who entertains me for a short time. Sonya Ray and I had our meeting when she was lying outside the door to your apartment, the left half of her face swelling with that enormous bruise. Did she ever tell you how she came by it? She didn’t, did she? It’s an interesting little tale, if a bit on the sordid side. As to what we spoke of, well, most of that is confidential—though I did tell her you were going to betray her.”

Ice water filled my chest. “What?”

“She didn’t believe me—contested the assertion with what vigor she could, given the amount of heroin saturating her brain. I’m sure you would find her loyalty touching. It was stupid, though, stupid and pathetic. Anyone with a modicum of knowledge of human nature—of *your* nature, in particular—could have predicted your departure.”

Tears trickled down my cheeks. “Sonya—she—Sonya never said anything about you.”

“No one does,” the man said. “The overwhelming majority of those who encounter me put the event out of their minds. A few remember but choose not to discuss our meeting with anyone. A smaller portion than that tell everyone, only to find themselves shuffling along the corridors of institutions.”

“Why, though?” I wiped my eyes. “Why continue these conversations? At this point, you must have heard it all.”

“You would think so. Speaking in general terms, I suppose it’s true. When it comes to the specifics, however, that’s where I live. If you’re imprisoned, you find amusement where you can. The means by which each of you abuses the spark Yahweh has wasted on you is endlessly diverting. Every exchange I have had further validates my initial objection to gifting you with the *pneuma* , which is simultaneously satisfying and enraging. I can’t resist the opportunity to begin tormenting you.”

“How is it torment if the people you meet forget it?”

The man held up his right hand with the index finger extended, a teacher correcting an inattentive pupil. “I didn’t say you forget our encounters. I said you put them out of your minds. You repress them. You know how repression works: the thing you struggle not to acknowledge nonetheless affects you. The instant Sonya’s eyes fell on your keys and she apprehended their significance, a part of her remembered my prediction about you, which made the pain she plunged into that much worse.”

“Which led to her death.”

“Don’t try to pass this off on me,” the man said, but something in his manner, a subtle shift in his features, suggested he was only too happy to have contributed to Sonya’s end. “You make your own choices. Although if I were going to pin the blame on anyone aside from Sonya…”

“It would be me,” I said.

“At last, a glimmer of intelligence.”

I had no reply. Although I resisted it, the moment the words left my tongue, I was overwhelmed by their accuracy.

“This is not to absolve Sonya of responsibility for her actions,” the man said. “Let us grant her the dignity of making her own decision. The more important question is, would she have shoved the needle into her arm had you not abandoned her? I suspect you know the answer.”

I nodded.

“What, then, is the degree of your culpability?”

“She was an addict,” I said at last. “She was going to do whatever she was going to do.”

“How do you expect me to believe that, when you clearly don’t?”

“I—”

“Not to mention, who was it that slid the syringe into her vein in the first place? There’s a direct line stretching from that needle to the one the nurse used to set up her IV the other day. No, I’m afraid you are wound up in this.”

“So what am I supposed to do?”

“That’s not my department,” the man said. “I can’t see that you have any good options. You could turn around and rush back to California. You could locate the hospital where Sonya’s body is lying, identify her to the staff, and contact her family, explain to them what happened to their daughter. (It’s up to you how much you want to excuse yourself for it.) You could sit with them as the specialists come and go, as they pray for the miracle that isn’t going to come. When her body fails a second time, and the staff are unable to revive her, you could hold her mother and father and cry with them, lie to them, tell them their daughter is in a better place, even though you know where she really is. Perhaps you can seek out her dealer, hurt or kill him in an attempt to wash away your guilt.

“Or you could leave here, climb into your car and continue on your way. Sonya’s body will give out before long, and her remains will be interred in a numbered grave. Her parents won’t know what became of their daughter, but you may decide it’s better they don’t.” The man folded his hands.

I said, “How do I know any of this is true?”

“You don’t. I could be lying to you. Isn’t that one of my aliases? If that’s what you suspect, then there’s one way to be certain: return to your former apartment and knock on the door. Should Sonya answer, you can depart, your conscience clear. Clearer, anyway. That’s assuming you would leave, and not be drawn into… ,” he licked his chapped lips, “everything. Because while you may not be able to decide whether Sonya is alive or dead, you have no trouble believing that, if she is among the living, she’s back to her old habit.”

The booth we were seated at had shortened, the painted scene running alongside drawn right up to it. Where previously the painting had been a marvel of *trompe l'oeil* technique, now it was simpler, cruder, a hasty sketch done in thick and crumbly chalk on a wooden board. In similar fashion, the table had gone from Formica to unfinished pine, splinters jutting from it. My seat was no longer cushioned, but reduced to the same rough wood. I glanced to my left, and instead of a window saw a sheet of plywood chalked black. I could no longer sense Sonya behind me. I sat up, said, "Where is she?"

"Sonya?" the foul-smelling man said. "Who can say?" He unclasped his hands, and in the process of sliding them over the table to separate them, drove a sizable splinter into the side of his left hand. Hissing, he jerked his hand up, turning it to view the sliver of wood slid under the skin. With the thumb and index finger of his right hand, he pinched the end of the splinter and began to draw it out, only for the wood to break apart. He flicked away the fragment he was holding and tried to grab the remainder, but his efforts pushed the wood deeper. After a couple of additional attempts that yielded no better results, he gave up. Around us, the atmosphere changed, became thicker, heavier. "*This* ," the man said through gritted yellow teeth, "this fucking *place*." The grinding noise returned, shaking the booth. His gaze swung in my direction, and I saw his irises shining with pale light, event horizons to the black holes that were his pupils. The hairs on my arms stood straight up. In his look, I felt all the rage condensed within him, the unrelenting anger toward me and everyone like me, forever consigning those trapped inside him to a torment that would never be severe or long enough. Terror shook me. I wanted to call out to God, to beg forgiveness for what I'd done and throw myself on His mercy, but I couldn't. This was, after all, no less than I deserved. Afraid as I was, I kept my eyes open and on the man across from me, determined to meet what appeared to be my imminent damnation with some modicum of dignity. His clothes rippled as if in agony.

But I was not swallowed whole by Hell; rather, there was a pop, as if a sizable bubble had burst, and everything around me expanded, rushed to what it had been prior to the man in the white suit and red shoes sliding in across from me, bumping his hip against the table in the process. My

waitress was placing the check in front of me. As she did, the expression on my face turned her, “Have a good night,” into, “Oh my God, are you all right?”

“Fine,” I said, my voice ashen. “I’m fine—just tired.”

Of course it was a lie, but at this point, I didn’t think one more sin would make a difference.

5

Impossible as it sounds, I paid my bill, walked across the parking lot to the motel, and climbed the stairs to my room, where I fell onto the bed fully clothed and plummeted into sleep like a stone dropping into a well. Thankfully, I did not have any dreams I remembered. The next day, I slid behind the wheel of my car and headed for the highway. My encounter with the foul-smelling man was fresh and vivid in my mind; if my brain had plans to repress our conversation, it was taking its time doing so. His words weighed in my ears as I drove toward I-90, but when the moment came to continue east or return west, I opted for east.

I reached Wiltwyck early the same afternoon, and was met by the property agent at the house into which I would move. Within a week of turning off the exit on the New York State Thruway, I found a job as a clerk for a lawyer with an office in Rhinebeck, across the Hudson. I used the insurance my new position provided to schedule an appointment with a therapist. Several times a day, I considered calling Sonya’s parents, but did not. I spoke to my therapist about the guilt I felt at abandoning Sonya, though I did not mention my encounter with the foul-smelling man, for fear of being involuntarily committed. I also discussed my long-standing panic attacks. The therapist put me on a low dose of an anti-anxiety medication which for two weeks darkened my mood and then gradually lightened it. The urge to contact Sonya’s mother and father decreased to once a day, then once every few days, then once every week, never completely leaving me, but recurring infrequently enough to make resisting it easier. After I had been in Wiltwyck six months, there was a night I attempted to locate Sonya, to discover whether the man in the white suit had been telling the truth, but my results were inconclusive. Her old social media accounts had been deleted;

if she had started new ones, they were under a name I did not know and could not guess. She hadn't had much of a social media presence to begin with, and there were no friends or friend groups I could check for photographs in which she might appear. I did a search for her obituary, but turned up nothing, as I mostly expected. Hadn't the man said she had been left at the hospital with no ID? I logged off my computer and went to bed.

All the while, my meeting with the man who had identified himself as the Devil went on playing in the back of my mind. Eventually, I confided about it to two people. The first was the minister at the Dutch Reformed Church I had started attending Sunday mornings on the recommendation of my therapist. Over coffee at the Broadway Diner, the minister listened to the story of my late night conversation. Once I was finished, she said, "Well."

"Well?" I said.

"If that was a hallucination, it was more detailed than any anyone else has described to me."

"Are you saying you think it wasn't a hallucination?"

"I think you're carrying a lot of guilt over leaving your girlfriend."

"That's all it is, a manifestation of guilt?"

The minister sipped her coffee. "I'm not sure we're in either/or territory, here. You've acknowledged the profound conflict your decision caused in you. In a state of such extremity, it's not out of the question that a malign power could seek to influence you."

"To what end?"

"Despair," the minister said. "That would be the textbook answer, and it sounds about right in this case. Forgiveness is something you have to be open to receiving. There's nothing the Devil would like better than for you to close yourself off to such a possibility, to refuse to accept it."

"The problem is, I'm not sure I should accept it. Scratch that," I said. "I'm pretty sure I shouldn't."

"Which is understandable, given what you've told me. Mercy can be much harder to receive than punishment."

I nodded. "What about, 'Every man meets the Devil once before he dies'?"

“You mean, aside from the gendered language? (Which, in this case, may not be so bad a thing.)”

“Yeah.”

“It sounds good—I could probably build a sermon around it—but there’s no real theological basis for it.”

“So you haven’t met the Devil?”

“I’m afraid not,” the minister said with a modest smile. For a second, less, there was a flicker behind her eyes, as if she were remembering something she had convinced herself was a dream, and then it vanished.

The other person I spoke to was my father, on the phone one Wednesday night after I had been in New York almost a year. This took much longer, due to his constant interruption, as he kept asking me to repeat and clarify details. I appended my discussion with the minister to it. When I was done, Dad said, “Do you want me to see if I can find Sonya? I know some people who might be able to help. Or I could reach out to Sonya’s parents.”

“What would you say to them?”

“I’ll come up with something; don’t worry about it.”

“You don’t think I’m crazy?”

“I think you’d feel a lot better if you knew where Sonya was.”

“According to the man, lying in an anonymous hospital bed somewhere,” I said. “If she’s still alive.”

“Unless he was lying to you,” Dad said, “which is exactly the kind of thing he would do, if he was who he claimed to be.”

“I don’t know,” I said.

“Tell you what,” he said. “Let me do a little digging, and if I turn up anything, I’ll let you know.”

“All right.”

That was the last we spoke of it. Either he failed to discover Sonya’s fate, or he did and opted not to share the information with me. I’ve never asked him if he’s had his own talk with the Devil.

Almost a year after our phone call, Dad sent me a check for six figures. On the memo line, he had written “screenplay.” He was at a film festival in Tokyo, but I succeeded in reaching him by e-mail, through which I learned that he had sold a contemporary adaptation of the Faust story for a very substantial sum of money. He had credited me as co-writer of the story. There was talk Francis Ford Coppola was interested in directing it. I had no idea what to do with the check, not one cent of which I had the remotest desire to touch. Eventually, I acceded to Dad’s request to deposit the money, though I did so in an account I opened expressly for that purpose, from which I have not drawn in the years since. I tell myself that, were Sonya Ray miraculously to contact me, I would turn over the account to her, but I have no expectation of hearing from her. The film remains in development.

My conversation with the foul-smelling man, the man in the white suit and red shoes, the man with black holes for his pupils, remains as vivid to me now as it was the following morning. For a long time, it filled me with dread of such profundity it routinely threatened to tip over into panic, despite my anti-anxiety medication. Neither that drug, nor alcohol, nor other illicit drugs, in any combination, soothed it, while the weekly church going I had started seemed far too little, far too late. I liked the minister, however, and the congregation was friendly, and that was enough for me to continue attending, despite my deep certainty, sitting amongst them, of my inevitable damnation.

I suppose I’ve learned to live with what awaits at the end of my life. I very much would like to believe that I might escape it, that I might be forgiven my part in the wreck of Sonya’s life, whatever her exact fate. Yet it’s that very complicity which demands I not embrace any mercy offered me. I failed Sonya in so many ways; the least I can do is not fail to be held accountable for it. Eventually, when my heart has stuttered to a stop, I will have my second meeting with the man who reeked of vinegar and rotten eggs, who wore the souls of the damned. I will find myself with him in that tiny room which is the universe, where we will talk until he instructs me to climb onto the crude table between us, in order for him to begin inflicting on me the punishment I have so long deserved.

Sefira

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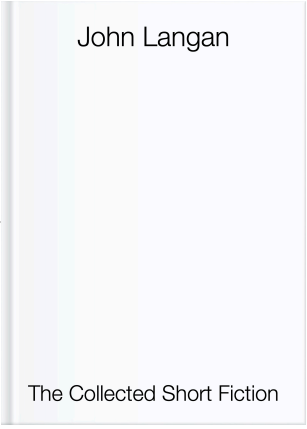

1

Lisa looked in the rearview mirror and saw that her eyes had turned black.

The process had started a week ago, her second day on the road. She'd been washing her hands in the ladies' room of a rest stop on I-80, somewhere in the sprawling middle of Pennsylvania, and when she glanced at the mirror for a spot-check, saw the black rings around her pupils. Heart beating hard against her sternum, she leaned forward. Her pupils were rimmed by black dark as squid ink. She drew closer. The black appeared to be moving, flowing sluggishly out of her pupil onto the green expanse of her iris. She pressed her nose toward the mirror, trying to distinguish more detail, but her eyes teared, her vision blurred. Reflection fractured, she pushed away and hurried out of the restroom. She forgot to dry her hands, which she didn't notice until she was gripping the wheel of her Accord.

For the next five hours, as evening faded into night and she continued on 80, until the fatigue drawing her lids down forced her to pull off at a truck stop outside Pittsburgh, Lisa checked her vision every ten minutes, closing first the left eye, then the right, in an attempt to determine the full extent of whatever was happening to her. As far as she was able to tell, the change to her eyes was chiefly cosmetic. Her vision didn't seem any worse, her eyes any more sensitive to light, nor was there any pain.

Which didn't make what happened to them over the following days any less unsettling. Days two and three brought the steady darkening of her irises, until even she could no longer say where the pupil ended and the iris began. The effect was both unnerving and noticeable enough for her to retrieve the Ray-Bans in the glove compartment and slide them on. On day four, another mirror, this one in a Day's Inn in Paducah, Kentucky, showed what appeared to be tiny black clouds churning over her eyes. When, up

unexpectedly early, she entered the bathroom, she was considering an extra hour in bed, the prospect of which evaporated as she studied this latest development. The blackness that had spread across her irises was venting up into the humor beneath her corneas, like smoke rising from some internal conflagration. As before, she couldn't detect any impairment to her vision, so after her shower, she slid on the sunglasses to which her reflection had become accustomed—it looked more than naked, it looked incomplete without the chunky tortoise shell frames—and headed out under the sky that was just beginning to fill with light.

At several instants, as she sped up and down Illinois, she saw the white "H" indicating a hospital off the next exit and debated turning from whatever road the Honda's wheels hummed across and steering straight for the emergency room. It wasn't a question of whether whatever was changing in her was something to be concerned about: how could it be anything but? It was a matter of being twenty-four, at most thirty-six hours behind Sefira, and a detour to the E.R. would consume days, because they would have to admit her, run tests, treat her—try, at least. What would happen when their efforts failed, as she guessed they would? Specialists would be called in, experts consulted, she would be transferred to a regional medical center, a university hospital. They wouldn't be able to let her go, would they? Not that she blamed them. They wouldn't want to risk her infecting others with her disease, whose long-term effects might be more severe than she'd yet experienced.

And all the while, Sefira would keep moving farther and farther away, first—assuming Madame Sosostris was correct—to the motel in Montana, and after that, who could say? There was the chance—slim, but not so much it could be discounted entirely—she would overtake Sefira, catch her unawares at some all-night truck stop, surprise her on her way back to that ridiculous van. Even if, as appeared likely, Sefira maintained her lead, Lisa would arrive in time to confront her at the motel. According to Madame Sosostris, she would rest there for at minimum three days, possibly a couple of weeks. All of that, however, was contingent on Lisa keeping her foot pressed on the gas pedal, the car in 5th. Lose a few days, lose Sefira.

By this point, Lisa had cycled three times through the assortment of CDs scattered on the passenger's seat and was beginning a fourth. At first,

driving north through the Adirondacks, she hadn't felt much like music, to put it mildly, and had passed the hours imagining arguments with Gary, switching the radio on to NPR when she grew tired of the sound of her voice. The following day, she roamed among the radio stations of upstate New York and the width of Pennsylvania, her finger pressing the radio's scan button almost compulsively, abandoning a song she didn't like only to return to it after a circuit of the local offerings turned up nothing better. She did the same thing the next morning, until sudden annoyance at the static caused by West Virginia's mountains prompted her to reach for the CDs on her right. With irony sharp as a scalpel's blade, her hand came up with Alanis Morissette's *Jagged Little Pill*. She had obsessed over the album in middle school, enjoying its defiant lyrics without understanding the raw emotions informing them. Suffice it to say, that had changed. She sang along to the tracks full-throated, and once it was done, played it again. Alanis was followed by Rihanna, then Luscious Jackson (another blast from the past), then Pink, Lady Gaga, and her guilty pleasures, Dolly Parton and Loretta Lynn.

She'd come by her appreciation for the last two through her job. One of her physical therapy clients was a late-middle-aged woman suffering from Parkinson's who had spent thirty years as a public-school music teacher before the disease forced her into early retirement. At the beginning of each of their sessions, Mrs. Mueller insisted on an album to serve as the accompaniment to her efforts. Her tastes were eclectic, ranging from Beethoven's later symphonies to Frank Sinatra's middle period. The day she put on *Jolene* , Lisa had wrinkled her nose at the album cover of Dolly Parton in her beaded green dress, her thick hair swept up and hair-sprayed in a blond elaboration. Mrs. Mueller tsked as if Lisa were one of her students. "Don't you dare frown at Dolly," she said, her eyes fierce, "the woman's a genius." To her surprise, Lisa agreed with her client, and on subsequent visits, had asked the music teacher if they could listen to another of the singer's albums. "I told you," Mrs. Mueller said. With each new session, she had taken Lisa through Dolly's catalogue, branching out to include Loretta Lynn and Patsy Cline. Gary had been annoyed by her newfound enthusiasm for, as he put it, his parents' music. He preferred electronica, long trains of sound that merged into one another. "It's for my

job," she said, more defensive than she should have been. At Rhino Records in Huguenot, she discovered a four-disc compilation of Dolly's greatest hits, along with a two-disc set of Loretta Lynn's best songs. She purchased both and kept them in her car, where they joined the music that accompanied her as she drove from client to client. Hearing Dolly's high, rich voice now was oddly comforting, although the opening lines of "Jolene," with their plea to the protagonist to leave the singer's beloved, made Lisa wince.

Day five of her journey, she awoke with her eyes burning. She stumbled past the frowns of the counter staff at the McDonald's in whose parking lot she'd been sleeping, into the bathroom. Her sunglasses clattered in the sink. The woman in the mirror might have had the mother of all hangovers, or a virulent case of pinkeye, except that the blood vessels crisscrossing the whites of her eyes were black, as if someone had drawn on her sclerae with a fine-tipped pen.

Throat tight, she splashed cold water in her eyes, which helped the burning for a moment, but had no effect whatsoever beyond that—as if it would have, as if she could have cleaned her eyes of whatever was staining them. She bought a bottle of sterile saline and a bottle of Visine at the CVS next to the McDonald's, then returned to the restaurant's bathroom to rinse her eyes with the saline and douse them with the drops. The treatment brought some measure of relief. She ordered a large coffee to go and returned to the road. On the car stereo, Dolly sang about drowning in an endless sea of tears. For the rest of the day, as she first crossed Missouri and then Kansas, her eyes were too dry, gritty, her eyelids scraping across them every time she blinked. She had to pull over what felt like every ten minutes to use the Visine. She was annoyed. The time it took her to roll to a stop, remove the Ray-Bans, tilt her head, pull down her lower lid, and squeeze the eye drop in was time slipping through her fingers. Immediately under the irritation, like dark water under a scrim of ice, was fear, anxiety that the process under way in her eyes had entered a new phase, that this was the start of something worse, something she'd missed whatever window she'd had to address. The fear seeped into her annoyance, until finally, on the other side of Topeka, Lisa went so far as to take the next exit with a hospital nearby. She navigated within sight of it, only to have an emotion she couldn't name

make her foot press the gas, her hands steer for signs leading back to the interstate.

When her eyes felt better the next morning, she told herself that she'd made the right decision. The black capillaries crosshatching the whites of her eyes had multiplied to the point the whiteness seemed the oddity, the results of a child's careless coloring. Within another twenty-four hours, only a couple of pale spots would remain across her eyes, like spattered paint. By then, she would have crossed into Montana, and whatever concern had swelled at the penultimate phase of her eyes' transformation was swallowed by the sensation that jolted her when she saw the sign welcoming her to Big Sky Country. It was as if the yellow line delineating the state's margin in her frayed and dog-eared Rand McNally were an actual border, as if in crossing it, she had passed into something else, analogue to the shift in the map's colors from the blue edge of Wyoming to the white expanse of Montana. It was like having had a bad cold, nose blocked, head fuzzy, and then taking a drug that cleared the symptoms instantly. The landscape streaming by her window wasn't especially different from what had flown past the last few hours in Wyoming—land like rumpled sheets on a bed, thick with yellow grass, the occasional house or gas station or farm like a set for a movie—yet it seemed brighter, as if lit from within by millions of tiny, brilliant lights. Thinking the phenomenon was attributable to something on the lenses of her sunglasses, she removed the Ray-Bans, but the impression remained.

Nor had it abated when a glance in the rearview mirror showed her eyes completely black. Despite everything, the catastrophe that was the last week-plus, what Gary had done and what had been done to him, what she intended for Sefira with the butcher knife wrapped in a towel and stuffed under the spare tire, Lisa was startled, jerked the car to the left, earning an angry honk from the eighteen-wheeler rumbling past her. She steered away from the truck, back into her lane. Loretta Lynn was singing about the Devil getting his due. The difference in her eyes was of the slightest degree, but she could not stop staring at them. After a second truck behind her, a pickup, beeped because she had failed to notice herself slowing from seventy to forty-five, she decided it was time to pull off. She hoped there was a McDonald's at the next exit. The drive-thru window meant she didn't

have to worry about the teenager working the register staring at her because she was wearing her sunglasses inside.

Not to mention her mouth—there was no disguising that, either.

2

Lisa Murray, née Martinez, never thought her husband would cheat on her. Foolish statement, she knew. Unless you had married someone you knew was promiscuous, or you were part of an open marriage, you expected fidelity. Although her teenaged self would have rolled her eyes hard enough to have knocked her off her feet, now that she was on the other side of thirty, Lisa increasingly looked to her parents' marriage as a model worth aspiring to. They had come to the Hudson Valley, to Newburgh, not long after their wedding in Guadalajara, so her dad could work in his cousin's garage. After having her sister and her, Lisa's mom had found a job as a secretary at the local high school. They had bought a house in the city, which they had traded for a house in the country the summer before Lisa started middle school. Her dad opened his own garage, specializing in Mercedes and other high-end vehicles because, as he said, it was as easy to fix a rich man's car as it was a poor man's, and you could charge him more. Her mom retired from her school job to help him manage the garage. That was the way it was with her parents: as their years together increased, they drew closer to one another. During her childhood and adolescence, so many of her friends had come from families whose parents led pleasant but parallel lives, meeting once a week for Sunday dinner before heading off in separate directions, again. The same was true of a number of her current friends and their spouses. However happy they might appear—or at least, not unhappy—Lisa wanted a marriage that consisted of something more than a shared living space and a weekly meal. She wanted the sense of being partners in a joint enterprise, her marriage a project she and Gary would continue to work on, with lots of dirty sex in the mix.

That Gary would continue to notice other women, even to look at particularly attractive ones, she had no doubt. He was a guy, after all. On top of her karate class, she spent several hours a week at the gym, and she was not averse to evaluating the men on display around her. Just because

you were married didn’t mean you were dead; as long as you ate at home, who cared where you got your appetite? Just because you were on a diet didn’t mean you couldn’t look at the menu. Choose your cliché, as long as your selection was followed by one more: you can look, but you’d better not touch.

In seven years of marriage, eight and a half of being together, she had made one exception, bent the rules for Gary’s brother Tim’s bachelor party, which one May night had taken them and a dozen of Tim’s friends from IBM to The Cusp, the strip club on the outskirts of Huguenot. The next morning, when Gary had related the night’s events to her, he swore he had no idea the party was going to wind up there, which she almost could accept. Tim was fervently religious, a mainstay of the local Catholic Church. (Although, what were the stereotypes about the devout?) Whether Tim was seething with repressed desire or not, his friends had decided they couldn’t allow him to cross the threshold into married life without a last debauch, so after burgers and beers at Pete’s Corner Pub, they’d piled into someone’s SUV and someone else’s SUV and made for The Cusp. Gary claimed he’d had just enough to drink for the idea to seem inspired. The lot of them had been at the club until well past midnight, when the steady parade of naked women finally wore down Tim’s resistance, and he consented to his friends’ buying him fifteen minutes in the VIP lounge. Lisa had had to admit, the picture of her dreadfully earnest brother-in-law, as buttoned down as his white polyester dress shirts, gazing wide-eyed and slack-jawed as a tattooed dancer with a stage name like Lilith or Isis gyrated in front of him was more than a little amusing.

Her smile had faded, though, when Gary added that he, too, had agreed to a quarter hour in the VIP lounge. Tim’s friends had insisted, as had Tim, himself, which she also almost could believe. If Gary were there with him, then it wouldn’t look as bad, would it? In case word got back to Robin, or in case his conscience compelled him to confess, there would be someone to vouch that he hadn’t really gotten up to anything with Lilith or Isis. And vice-versa, of course. She succeeded in keeping her voice light, level, as she said, “Oh?”

“Yeah,” Gary said, cheeks and forehead flushing, rubbing his hands together the way he did when he was nervous. “I’m sorry. I mean, nothing

happened or anything. This girl just danced around in front of me for a while; that was it. I shouldn't have let them talk me into it, I know. It was just—Tim, he looked so desperate—"

"How was his fifteen minutes?"

"I think he has some new ideas about heaven." When she laughed, he added, "No, seriously, it was fine. It was nothing."

She raised an eyebrow.

"What?"

"I didn't know you were into strippers. You learn something new every day."

"I'm not—I don't—"

"Maybe I should start taking a pole-dancing class."

"You—really?" he said, catching on to the joke.

That was how she dealt with her husband's disclosure of his fifteen minutes in the VIP lounge at The Cusp, with humor, by acting as if the situation were too ridiculous to bother being upset about. For the next couple of weeks, she teased him about it. Driving past The Cusp on the way to Gary's mother over in Hyde Park, she said, "Sure you don't want to stop in? They're offering a special on lap dances, two for the price of one." Looking over from the TV Guide channel, she said, "Hey, CNN's doing a special report on strippers. We should watch it. Maybe you'll see someone you know." Holding up boxes of hair coloring in the aisle in ShopRite, she said, "Which one would you say is more exotic dancer, cherry Kool-Aid or bleach?" If her jokes were passive-aggressive—or aggressive-aggressive—they kept her from pursuing certain lines of inquiry. She didn't ask him the girl's name (because it would have been a false name). She didn't ask him to describe her (because suppose she was Lisa's opposite, or worse, her double?). And she most certainly did not ask him for the gory details (because he had said nothing happened).

Throughout, Gary continued to blush, continued to apologize, continued to act, she thought, more like someone who was deeply embarrassed than someone who was deeply guilty. The circumstantial evidence supported his version of events. Tim was his only brother. The rest of his guy friends were

happily married. He swore he had no desire to return to the Cusp's dimly lit interior. So in the end, Lisa decided to give her husband a pass. Not quite a free one, because she reserved the right to mock him about it should the mood strike her, but one that was heavily discounted.

To any of her friends to whom she told the story, that was the matter over and done with. Most of them were good enough to allow her that ending. Janice, her older sister, had a few acid remarks, but there was no situation for which she did not. If her questions about why Gary had done the laundry that morning before he had made his admission to her—and had she checked their bank balance to be sure he hadn't paid for the dancer, himself—and was she positive he stayed at home writing his computer manuals while she was out working with PT clients—if these questions and what they none-too-subtly implied stuck in her brain, stingers whose barbs anchored them too securely for her to remove easily, then it was because her big sister had a sixth sense for her weak spots, always had. Lisa resisted the urge to call Gary while she was on her way from one client to another. She refused to pore over that month's bank statement. She noticed that her husband did the laundry approximately every five days. She didn't talk to Janice again for a week.

The only thing Lisa could not stop herself from doing was picturing the girl. She made every effort not to, to think about something else, but apparently, her neuroses demanded this tidbit in exchange for lying low. From the start, she knew what the dancer had looked like, which surprised her. She would have expected more debate with herself, more wondering, Would Gary prefer tall or short? blonde or brunette? busty or leggy? Instead, from the moment she thought of the stripper, she saw her with hyper-real clarity. Busty *and* leggy: breasts a double-d, legs not as slim as they could be because of the hips needed to balance the boobs, but long enough to look full rather than chunky. Thick, shoulder-length hair dyed blond (badly) then hair-sprayed into a mane that would have done an '80s singer proud. Not as tall as the hair and legs made her seem, maybe five three, five four, but with good shoulders, good posture, and a pair of platform shoes that boosted her height. She was tan, tattooed with a bee above and to the left of her shaven crotch, and wore a navel ring. She began her act in a hot pink short dress, which was more of a long t-shirt, and

which she wasted no time peeling off as she undulated to the music blasting from the speakers (something metal: Lisa wasn't sure of this detail). Once the dress was gone and now in a G-string the same neon pink, the girl roamed the stage, slipping one hand under the G-string and sliding her palm around her hip, pulling the tight pink fabric even tighter. She would draw out this part of her performance, ease one side of the G-string down, then let it stay there for a while. And throughout, Gary sitting beside the stage, rapt.

Strangely enough, when at last she told someone about this, it was Janice. More strange, her sister didn't kick her when she was down, didn't say, "I told you so." No, for once, Janice said what Lisa would have wanted her to, that there was no sense in tormenting herself, what was done was done, and anyway, Gary had said it wasn't his idea, hadn't he? And nothing happened, right? Hearing Lisa's description of the hypothetical stripper, Janice said, "She's your opposite, that's all. You're tall and thin; she's short and full. You're brunette and dark; she's a *güera*." (This was after Janice had, as she put it, embraced her heritage, peppering the high school Spanish she remembered with vocabulary and expressions drawn from Google searches.) "You're what? an a-cup?"

"Har-har," Lisa said, smiling despite herself.

"I'll take that as a yes. She's got tits to die for—and the back problems to prove it. She's all your anxieties in a G-string and platform shoes."

Lisa wasn't so dense she hadn't realized this herself, but hearing Janice saying it in her no-nonsense voice gave the explanation a force and solidity it hadn't possessed inside her head. She waited for the other shoe to drop, for Janice to add, "Not that Gary wouldn't climb all over this kind of girl," but if Janice held another pump, she kept her fingers tightly around it. Although it amazed her to think it, Lisa's sister was the one who allowed the pass she'd given Gary to remain in effect.

This said, had you asked her to speculate on the type of woman with whom her husband might forget his marriage vows, the image of that dancer would have leapt in front of her mind's eye before she'd had time to formulate an answer, an ongoing symbol of her insecurities. Perhaps that was why, the following September, when reports of Gary seen with another

woman flooded in (there was no beginning trickle, only an immediate deluge), she was slow to credit them, as the woman they described in no way fit the picture Lisa had of Gary's fantasy. After her friend Karen called to ask about the woman she'd seen with Gary leaving Pete's the other day around lunchtime—freakishly tall, stick-insect thin, black hair, huge sunglasses, wearing some kind of white lace sheath thing that covered her from neck to ankle like Morticia Adams's prom dress—Lisa had been surprised (Gary hadn't mentioned any lunch plans; though there was no reason for him to have done so), but not especially alarmed. Gary had a lot of female friends, probably more than his male friends. He'd been that way for as long as she'd known him, and while the person Karen had detailed didn't match any of her husband's friends, probably it was someone from undergrad passing through town, or someone she knew of who'd gotten in touch with her inner Goth (not that the description otherwise matched anyone she recognized). Making light of Karen's concerned tone, she said, "Oh, her. That's Gary's new girlfriend. Yeah, we decided to go the open-marriage route. I'm doing my gynecologist. He knows where to put his hands, let me tell you." Karen responded with shocked silence, then nervous laughter.

Over dinner that night, Lisa asked Gary about the woman. "Hey. Who's this lunch date I heard about?"

Frequently, these types of questions brought a blush to Gary's forehead, cheeks. This time, he looked up from his salad with his pallor unchanged. If anything, it seemed slightly yellow, as if showing the early signs of jaundice—no doubt a trick of the kitchen light. He didn't bother asking what she was talking about. It was as if he'd been waiting to deliver his answer. Through a mouthful of half-chewed tomato, he said, "Her name's Sefira."

"Sefira, huh? Old friend?"

"She's someone I met online. She e-mailed me about helping her set up a website. She wanted to meet to discuss it."

In addition to his job as a tech writer, Gary had a side-business in web-design, small enough to be microscopic. She could count on two fingers the

number of sites he'd built, and that was including the one for her physical therapy practice. "How did she hear about you?"

"Your site," he said. "She has a sister who needs PT, and when she came across your page, she was impressed enough to contact me."

That sounded reasonable. "What kind of business is she in?"

"New Age stuff. Tarot, crystals, demonology."

"Demonology?"

"Yeah. It has to do with getting in touch with hidden forces. She explained it to me, but to be honest, most of it went in one ear and out the other. No big deal. I don't need to understand it to build the site."

"Just as long as you don't wind up with your head spinning around and pea soup shooting out of your mouth."

He smirked. "Don't worry, I'll keep my crucifix handy."

And that was that. The night brought calls from two more friends, one of whom had witnessed Gary and the woman at lunch at Pete's, the other of whom had seen the two of them standing talking on Main Street beside his car, both of whom tried as subtly as they were able to say that Gary and this woman had appeared awfully… close, and to ask if everything was all right between her and her husband. Lisa had no difficulty reassuring them that her marriage was fine, they had seen Gary with a new client, that was all.

She was able to repeat the same or similar sentiments the following day, to the three friends who left messages for her on her cell, and to the two more who phoned her at home, one at nine, the other at ten thirty. All five were checking in with additional reports of Gary and Sefira, spotted drinking coffee at Starbuck's, crossing Main Street (him with his hand on her elbow), and sharing another lunch at Pete's. Again, Sefira had been wearing the outsized sunglasses, this time with a red dress slit thigh-high and a pair of long black boots.

Lisa's friend Liz, a painter, couldn't decide precisely what shade of red the dress was, only that it was dark. She was also the one who remarked of Sefira's figure, "God, have you seen this woman? She's—I mean, it isn't that she's thin, no, thin would be fat compared by comparison. *This* is beyond supermodel anorexia. It's beyond skeletal. She's like a collection of

lines, a stick-figure from a game of hangman. I don't know if you've ever seen anyone in that state, but it's like, you have this physical response to them, this… revulsion. For all that," she added, "and I realize how bizarre this is going to sound, coming after what I just said, I think this woman may be the sexiest woman—the sexiest *thing* I've ever laid eyes on."

"You're right," Lisa said. "How can a skeleton be sexy?"

"No, you don't understand. She isn't even a skeleton. Put two of her one behind the other, and you'd have maybe half a skeleton. It is, it's disgusting."

"But she's sexy."

"Yes, my God, yes. This woman—she doesn't ooze sex. Sex pours off her. She's radioactive with sex. Sex is a highly contagious disease and she's Typhoid Mary. I think of myself as pretty straight. I can admire the aesthetics of the female form, its beauty, but it doesn't turn my motor over. Let me tell you, one look at this woman, and I was ready to strip naked, slather myself with whipped cream, and invite her to lick it off."

"And yet she's repulsive."

"I know, I know, it's completely nonsensical. There it is, though. All I can say is, you must trust Gary way beyond an awful lot to let him spend so much time with her. I wouldn't trust myself, let alone Brian."

To greater and lesser degrees, the rest of Lisa's friends echoed Liz's assessment. Body like a wire sculpture; erotic as a tongue tracing an upper lip. It was the intensity of the latter impression that sent her friends speed-dialing her number. By the third time she heard one of her girlfriends describing the woman as sex incarnate, Lisa was amused by the coincidence, albeit, amused in a way that was more uncomfortable than she cared to admit. Her discomfort increased after caller number four (Liz) and by the time she hung up from talking to Victoria at quarter after eleven, she was wondering if Gary were still awake, so that she could seek further reassurance from him. She rinsed her glass, shut off the downstairs lights, and went up to bed.

As it turned out, Gary was awake—or, not so deeply asleep that, when she slid in under the covers beside him, he couldn't roll over to greet her. Somewhat to her surprise, he was naked, his cock not yet standing at

attention, but sufficiently full to signal its readiness to be so. She wasn't displeased, not exactly, but after a day of reports of him and the goddess of sex, it was difficult not to think of his arousal as having another inspiration than his wife in her blue mermaid pajamas. There was no time for a clever remark, or an earnest question, because he pressed himself against her, his hands sliding over and under her pajamas, his lips searching out hers. Gary was a good kisser, but it had been literally years since he'd kissed her like this, his mouth electric on hers. His hands cupped her breasts, his fingertips sparking her nipples, as if his fingers were charged. Everywhere he touched, her neck, her back, her ass, flared with sensation, with pleasure. His sex was ripe and rich between them; her panties were soaked. Hot—his skin was burning, feverish, the space under the sheets a sauna. She kicked the covers from the bed, felt no cooler. She pulled her pajama top over her head, pushed her bottoms and panties down and flicked them away with her foot. If anything, she was hotter. She turned to Gary, lying on his back, cock bouncing ever-so-slightly with his pulse. She felt herself open for him, her cunt tingling with anticipation. Taking his member in one hand, Gary gasping at her fingers grasping him, she swung her leg up and over, angling his cock upwards as she lowered herself onto and around him. She exhaled sharply. He was as big as he'd ever been, bigger, engorged. She was full of him, the spot where their pelvises ground against one another throwing off bolts of pleasure that shot up her belly, down her thighs, along her spine. Gary caught her breasts as she moved forward, easing him halfway, three-quarters, almost all the way out of her, then backward, taking him in again all at once. When she did so a second time, he raised his hips to meet her. Another, and another, and another, his hands on her breasts, her ribs, her ass, and another, her breath faster, her teeth on her lower lip, half-moaning as each thrust brought her closer to the moment the bubble of pleasure building in her was going to burst, and another, and her nerves sang as if she'd been struck by lightning, as if raw current were pouring through them, lighting her up from the inside out. The orgasm rolled over her in waves, one right after the other, each forcing a cry from her lips. Nerves aglow, she rolled off Gary and flopped onto the bed, a sigh the best her mouth could manage.

Before she could invite Gary for Round Two, he was kneeling beside her, urging her to turn over. She smiled drunkenly, mumbling, “Woof-woof,” and raised herself on her hands and knees. The mattress shifted as he positioned himself behind her. She felt his cock, hot and wet against the left cheek of her ass, and reached between her legs to guide him. He pushed forward, she backward, and she was around him. He drew almost all the way out, then plunged back in. As he did, he leaned over her, reaching with his right hand to stroke between her thighs. Neurons she would have sworn were shorted, fried, flickered and glowed. From I’m-good-you-do-what-you-have-to, she went to meeting his thrusts, sliding her knees to either side to take him in deeper, stretching her hand back to find the weight of his balls and drag her nails over them. Gary inhaled sharply and increased the tempo, pistoning in and out of her while she caressed his balls and his fingers moved in ever-quicker circles. She was almost there—she was there, pleasure detonating on top of itself, reverberating up and down her. She shuddered, calling, “Oh, oh God,” and, shouting, Gary came, spilling himself inside her in a series of hot jets. Some of his semen streamed down her leg, and her own orgasm must have made her more sensitive, because his cum was hot, so much she could picture it steaming.

Afterward, lying tangled with Gary under the sheets he had retrieved, all concerns about Sefira, if not banished, then sent to a distant province, she allowed herself to drift to the sleep lapping the shores of her consciousness. Out and down, down, deep into darkness, into warm blankness.

3

Her third day of driving, Lisa noticed that her teeth hurt. She had turned off I 80 for a series of local roads that led her into West Virginia via its northern spur, then down its heaped mountains. At a convenience store perched on a ledge beside a rushing stream, she bought a pre-made ham and cheese sandwich, a packet of Twinkies, and an extra-large coffee, over which she held the glass sugar-dispenser until the surface of the drink had risen to the cup’s lip. She bent to taste it, and decided she had added enough sugar to render the bitter, oily brew drinkable. By the time she was nearing the bottom of the cup, the bland sandwich and dessert cakes long gone, their bunched wrappers rolling on the passenger side floor as she steered the

curves of an especially convoluted road, her teeth had started to ache. The pain was dull, distant, rooted somewhere beneath the enamel, in the pulp. It spread through her mouth, as if she'd bitten into a scoop of ice cream straight from the freezer. She rolled her tongue around the inside of her cheek, tasted sugar gritty on her teeth, reviewed the past few days' diet of heavily sweetened coffee, snack cakes, any kind of soda so long as the label mentioned caffeine, and candy bars. *Terrific* , she thought, *not only is something wrong with my eyes, I'm going to need a root canal or three*. One more thing to thank Gary and Sefira for. On the car stereo, Pink sang that she was still a rock star. "Oh, fuck off," Lisa said, and hit the power.

That night, in a gas station near the Kentucky border, Lisa dug the toothbrush and toothpaste for which she'd run into a Wal-Mart two hours earlier out of their plastic bag and set to work cleaning her teeth. Once she was finished, she rinsed her mouth with iron-flavored tap water and brushed again. After she spat a second mouthful of foaming water into the sink, her teeth still hurt. She considered a third pass around her gums, decided her mouth felt sufficiently scoured for further brushing to be more obsessive-compulsive than hygienic. At least the pain wasn't any worse.

She cleaned her teeth in the motel bathroom as soon as she awoke the following morning, and again after her vending-machine breakfast of stale frosted cherry Pop-Tarts and blisteringly hot tasteless coffee. Compared to the steady blackening of her pupils, the discomfort of her teeth was of minor concern, but it was sufficiently distracting for her to buy a bottle of Extra Strength Tylenol at the rest area she stopped at for lunch and wash three chunky tablets down with a swallow of Coke. If the acetaminophen helped, it was to such a minute degree as to make no practical difference, which didn't stop her from taking another three that night between brushing her teeth and falling into the bed she'd taken at the Day's Inn in Paducah. She was too exhausted for the pain to prevent her sleeping; nor was it strong enough to follow her into her dreams.

Were her teeth really that yellow? she asked herself the next day, in the bathroom of the Cracker Barrel where she was waiting for her dinner to be served. She'd gone in to check her eyes and while gazing in the mirror had noticed her teeth, which continued their background ache, and which she continued to treat ineffectually with the Tylenol, telling herself that the pain

might be worse without it. No doubt she should search out a dentist, but if she weren't tending to her eyes, then she wasn't likely to do anything for her teeth, which were jaundiced, as if she'd been using coffee as a mouthwash. Which she just about had been. She drew back her lips and dragged her index finger left to right across them, from canine to canine. Her skin squeaked on the enamel, but the color remained unchanged. She sighed, resumed her sunglasses, and returned to her table, where her dinner was waiting for her. After she was done, she ordered a large coffee to go—she had far enough to drive tonight not to—but grimaced as she did.

Her eyes were in too much discomfort the proceeding morning for her to worry over the state of her mouth. At one point, vision swimming with Visine, she glanced in the rearview mirror and thought that her teeth looked more yellow in the middle, as if their discoloration were spreading up and out from the soft spaces where they continued to ache. Not until the day after brought her eyes relief, however, did she devote any time to a closer inspection of her mouth. In the ladies room of a Burger King on the outskirts of Denver whose heavy stink of piss gave the lie to the cleaning schedule posted on the door, Lisa tugged the corners of her lips up and away with her fingers. The tooth enamel was the yellow of daffodils left to rot in a vase of stagnant water. The color concentrated down the center of each tooth, where it described irregular lines, zig-zags, lightning bolts. Toward the edges, her teeth grew paler, to the point of translucency. She traced a finger over them, and was surprised to feel them rough as sandpaper in places. Leaning into the mirror, she saw that the roughest spots matched where the yellow was most dense. She slid her fingers along the contours of her bite, top then bottom. Her teeth were sharper, more jagged, tugging her fingertips.

She wasn't sure when she made the connection between the blackness overtaking her eyes and the hurt daily filling her mouth. Almost from the start, she supposed. It must have been the second day her teeth ached that she knew (didn't realize, *knew*) the two were related, joint symptoms of something she wasn't prepared to contemplate, the straw that, dropped on top of everything else, Gary, that house, was going to leave the camel a quadriplegic.

So she clenched that straw in her hand and held it there as eastern Kentucky and its domed mountains smoothed into the western reach of the state and its long swells of earth, rows of dark green tobacco rippling like spokes on a wheel as she sped past them on local roads that finally released her into Paducah. She held that straw tightly the following day, when she was back on the highway and heading north up the length of Illinois, through the flattest land she'd ever seen, the only disturbances in it man-made, overpasses for local roads, until she reached Champagne-Urbana and Sefira's trail looped back south and Lisa weighed continuing north, picking up 90 and trying to reach Montana ahead of her, to set up some kind of ambush, versus pulling off at the next exit so she could pursue Sefira down the state. (She heard Madame Sosostris saying, "You must adhere to the path she is making.") She opted not to break off her chase and drove through a thunderstorm that took up the entire early-evening sky, lightning like bright seams in the clouds, rain crackling on the windshield.

By the time she was crossing the broad Mississippi into St. Louis, the gray ribbon of the Arch on her right appeared to be slowly rotating as she stole glances at it, which she was reasonably sure it wasn't meant to do, so she drove to the outskirts of the city, found the parking lot of a McDonald's, and let unconsciousness take her.

Yet she never released her hold on that crippling straw, not that night and not the next day, as she made her slow way across Missouri to eastern Kansas, with its surprisingly steep gullies, and on to the state's western flatlands, despite her eyes feeling as if someone had poured coarse sand into them. When she detoured through Topeka in search of a hospital, she almost lost her grip on the straw, could feel the camel's legs trembling, but she recovered herself and turned in the direction of the interstate.

Nor did the straw come as close to slipping from her again, as the grasslands of western Kansas thinned to the arid waves of eastern Colorado, day bleeding into night. She took a room at a Day's Inn overlooking a reach of brown grass at the center of which a gray, single-story farmhouse listed toward a dead tree. The next day, the first part of her journey led her along a series of local roads past long barbed wire fences strung on tilting posts, lots crowded with cattle, a row of towers carrying power lines above the landscape like metal giants. She wondered when she'd see the Rockies and

then there they were, huge even through the distance and haze, nothing at all like the Appalachians. Those mountains shouldered age, history so ancient most of it had been ground off them. These peaks leaned against the sky as if reclining on it, monuments to unimaginable gods, or those gods themselves. Not until she was standing in the ammoniac air of a restroom in Denver did Lisa relax her palm, and in so doing discover that she had squeezed the straw with such force for enough time that it had slipped under her skin, dissolved into her blood, infiltrated the nooks and crannies of her brain to the point its burden of dread had dissipated. Of course the blackening of her eyes, the yellowing of her teeth, were related. It would be far stranger if they weren't.

Braced, if not cheered, by her truth-telling, Lisa ordered a bacon double-cheeseburger, large onion rings, and large Coke to go, watching from behind her sunglasses the cashier's attempt to limit her glances at her mouth. Meal in hand, she flashed the server a smile that made her jump. *If you can't have fun with your monstrous transformation* , she thought, crossing to her car, *what can you have fun with?*

She waited until Denver was clustered in her rearview mirror before rustling through the paper bag in search of her burger. After avoiding fast food for literally the last decade—since, as a college junior, she had decided that, if she was planning on a career in physical therapy, she should model the healthy lifestyle she would be recommending to her clients—the past seven days had seen her diet switch to the all-junk-food plan pretty much overnight. She might as well have been fourteen again, pimpled and drastically unhappy and deadly to any plastic-wrapped confection to cross her path. At scattered moments, she could hear Janice's reproach: "Just because your idiot husband's flushed his life down the toilet doesn't mean you're required to follow his example. I'm pretty sure any obligation you had to him ceased the moment he started boning that skanky *puta*." True, needless to say, but God how she loved the taste of it, from the chalky sweetness of a Hershey bar to the mealy saltiness of a can of Pringles, from the battered blandness of a box of McNuggets to the charcoaled bite of a Whopper. Not to mention soda, Coke, Pepsi, Mountain Dew, Dr. Pepper—pick your beverage, there was none of it that tasted in any way natural. Fuel, she told herself, this stuff was a quick source of the sugar, the protein,

the caffeine, the carbs she needed to maintain her pursuit of Sefira. So what if she liked it?

Her fingers freed the bacon double-cheeseburger from its wrapper. Mouth thick with saliva, she raised the sandwich to her lips and took a generous bite of it.

And nearly lost hold of the wheel as pain roared through her mouth. This was not the dull-but-persistent-ache of the last several days, this was the dentist's drill skating across the open nerve before the Novocain has finished working. It was a Fourth of July's worth of fireworks, detonating up and down her teeth, her gums, her jaw, her skull. She tried to move her mouth, to spit out the lump of burger balanced on her tongue, and her eyes flashed with the pain, white bursts wiping the other cars on the road from her view. If she didn't pull over immediately, her pursuit of Sefira was going to end in a tangle of metal and glass, which, even if she survived, would lead straight to the hospital, do not pass go, do not go anywhere. She slapped the turn signal and eased her foot off the gas, steering for the shoulder through a chorus of complaining horns. For what couldn't have been more than ten seconds, but stretched into what felt like minutes, she hunched her shoulders, tensing in anticipation of the car or truck whose collision with her she was certain was imminent. Only when she had guided the Honda as close to the guardrail as she could, shifted to neutral, and yanked the parking brake, did Lisa relax in her seat. After which she opened her door, leaned out, and let the soggy mass of meat and bun fall from her open mouth to the pavement. Even that lit up her skull.

Every last one of her teeth felt loose. It was a sensation she would have assumed archived on the long shelves of her childhood memories, the kind of dusty artifact you retrieved when one of your nieces or nephews was expecting her or his first payment from the Tooth Fairy. A half-pleasant ache, a spot in your mouth your tongue couldn't stop testing, worrying, a space opening as enamel parted from gum. Not this: her teeth seemed to shift with the slightest movement of her jaw, no two in exactly the same direction, each tooth still threaded to its socket by a nerve that flared with the least provocation.

To the extent that she could think with so much pain, Lisa was certain that the next five or ten minutes would bring the sight of a Colorado state police

cruiser, roof rack stuttering red and white, to her rearview mirror. If the trooper didn't take one look at her and radio for an ambulance, he might assume she was on some kind of drug (didn't meth rot the teeth?) and order her out of the car, in order to search it for her stash. Which he wouldn't find, of course, but his investigation would lead him to the trunk, and the rolled towel under the spare tire. She could picture the cop lifting the bundle out of the tire well, setting it on the trunk floor, and unrolling it. She could see his features tightening from anticipating to consternation as the cream terrycloth revealed not baggies green with pot, or a white brick of cocaine, but a broad-bladed butcher knife, the kind of implement that comes as part of a set, twelve knives and a pair of meat scissors, slotted into a block of blond wood. It said, wedding present, which it was, or housewarming gift; although the rubber bands wrapped around the black plastic handle to ensure a better grip, and the symbols scratched onto the blade's matte silver finish were more recent modifications. Who knew if the cop would recognize any of the writing, let alone be able to translate it, but if he identified the row of characters closest to the hilt as Arabic—even though those symbols represented one language among many, including Hebrew, Greek, Latin, and Norse—the situation would become exponentially more complicated. Under normal circumstances, she would have trusted her ability to talk her way out of worse trouble than this, especially with a male cop, but with her brain jammed by all the reports of agony trying to force their way into it, she didn't expect she'd be up to more than a blank stare at the cop as he displayed the knife to her and asked if she could explain it to him. Jail would slow her as much as a hospital.

She had to get off the highway, take the next exit and find a place to lay low until the worst of the hurt passed (if at all). The words she employed for her difficult clients, the ones at the beginning of a long course of therapy to restore mobility and strength to an arm withered by a stroke, a leg after hip surgery, or the ones whose fear of the difficulties to come brought curses to their lips the moment they saw her, or the ones who had no hope of regaining the use of their legs or arms, but needed to exercise them to prevent further compromise of their health: those words whispered over her eardrums. *Okay. All right. We're going to take this slowly, all right? Nice and slowly. There we go. Yes, I know it hurts. Okay. But that's all right. It*

means the muscle's working. Easy. And if it's working, that means it can get better. Okay. Keep going. All right. Almost there. Easy, easy. Nice and slowly. I know, I know. It hurts. I know. Okay. Almost there. Almost. The soundtrack was barely audible over the pain playing the *1812 Overture* , complete with cannon, in the rest of her skull, but she listened for it, tuned into it the way she told her clients to. *My voice is a station on the radio, okay? And the pain you're feeling, that's static. I want you to tune out the static, and tune in my station, Station Lisa, all right?* This was like trying to bring in a signal from three states over on your clock radio, but she could make out just enough to permit her to set the blinker, release the parking brake, shift into first, and, hands tight on the steering wheel, let out the clutch.

Were she looking for evidence of divine sanction for her mission, the next quarter hour might have provided it. Either that, or it was proof of the operations of a principle of chance so utterly random it could allow the conjunction of unlikely events necessary to deliver her from the spot beside the guardrail, onto the highway, into the path of a double tractor-trailer that somehow swerved around her, the slipstream buffeting the Accord, past the first exit, which she was speeding past before it registered, off onto the next exit, which approached too soon and which she took too fast, tires shrieking as she held the wheel against a ramp that curved back on itself, through a traffic light she watched flip to red as she sped under it, along a road lined with big-box stores, to the parking lot of yet another Wal-Mart—the entire journey, her mouth roaring, white spots flickering in front of her eyes, as if her vision were a movie surrendering to the projector's heat. Nor did the hurt abate once she was safely parked and reclining in her seat, doing her best to remain completely still, the rise of her chest, the thrum of her pulse, motion enough to trigger her nerves.

On top of everything else, she was starving. The interior of the car was thick with the heavy smell of beef, the crisp odor of bacon, the sweet reek of onion rings in their batter. She could practically pick out the milky effusions of the melted cheese, the briny greenness of the pickle, the salt tang of the smeared ketchup. Her stomach didn't just growl, it wailed. Drool spilled over her lower lip. Although doing so made her gums feel as

if someone was jabbing pins into them, she wiped her mouth with the back of her hand.

A sip of her Coke did nothing to blunt her hunger, and the rush of icy sweetness on her teeth dissolved them into a burning mass. Too much, it was too much. She was sliding into panic; she struggled not to throw open the car door, leap out, and run around the parking lot screaming. All she could do was let the pain wash over her, try to draw it into her, another instruction she gave her clients; albeit, one she'd never had great faith in. There was no need for her to close her eyes to visualize it. She could see it twisting around her, a roiling fog dense as taffy, the sickly yellow of sulfur, of a bruise three days old, of snow spoiled with piss. She had—it wasn't a coherent thought as much as an impression that this wasn't her imagining, wasn't *only* her imagining, but that was as far as the impression extended.

She opened her mouth, not wide, as much as she would to talk, and took a deep breath, inhaling the sulfur cloud, letting it pour over her tongue, down her throat, into her lungs, out to the rest of her body. Even the rush of air over her teeth stung. The pain wavered, subsiding the slightest fraction, then spiking, then spiking from there, then subsiding, then plummeting, then rising. If there was a pattern to its oscillations, she was in no state to discern it. Instead, she continued breathing in the yellow fog, which was full of black flecks, ash, as if it had vented from a volcano, from one of the earth's fiery arteries. The pain rose and fell and rose and rose. Within the furnace that was her mouth, her teeth were losing coherence, melting. She inhaled the fog coiled around her. The flecks of ash blew up from and dipped back into the churning yellow. Did they—did she see wings on some of them? She maintained her breathing.

The pain didn't subside as much as it submerged. The sulfur cloud swirled and seethed within her, from the peak of her scalp to the soles of her feet. She could swear that the skin on her hands, her arms, had gained a yellow cast. Her teeth were soft as putty. She rode the frothing crest of agony until it dropped, draining away from and into her, as if her body at last had discovered secret reservoirs capable of holding this pain and opened them all at once. She could still sense the hurt, but as something bottled, the yellow fog trapped in a great glass tank.

She didn’t faint; rather, everything receded, carried away by the tide of relief that swept her. She was aware of the air dimming, of the day’s gradual bleed into night, of cars coming and going around her, of an empty shopping cart clattering its slow way across the parking lot until it crashed into a concrete barrier. But it was all news from a distant country. Her insides were charred. Heat poured from her open mouth. Her teeth—something was wrong with her teeth. They were different, no longer soft, but as if they’d hardened into a new configuration, one her lips sat over uneasily. Her brow creased. Her tongue edged forward—then jerked away as something sliced it. Eyes wide, Lisa sat up, one hand rising to her mouth, the other twisting the rearview mirror toward her. A bright line of pain shone red at the end of her tongue. She parted her lips to inspect this latest insult, only to leap back with a shriek at what awaited her in the mirror. Her teeth—she couldn’t have seen that, could she?

A second nick of her tongue returned her to the mirror. She stared at eyes so given over to black it was difficult to distinguish the exact places where the green rims of her irises had curved against the whites of her sclerae. Why should this be any more surprising or terrible than what was already happening to her? She raised her upper lip, flared the bottom lip, and saw gums full of broken glass. The straight white rows it had cost her the extraction of two teeth and eighteen months of braces to purchase during her early teens had been replaced by a mess of dirty yellow shards. No two were the same, nor did any protrude at exactly the same angle as its neighbors. All were sharp as razors, which her tongue regretted and which her index finger verified when she traced the uneven tops of the lower set and felt her skin part. She tilted her head this way and that, examining her gums, stretched and tortured by their new occupants, and groaning at the spectacle. Her tongue tore itself a third time, and the mirror shimmered and dissolved in the tears that flooded out from beneath her eyelids, streaming over her lashes. Her breath caught, hitched, and she was crying, sobbing, a single, shouted question, “What the FUCK?!” holding place for a dozen others.

Your monstrous transformation , she thought after a moment of her tear ducts emptying themselves, her nose streaming, her tongue cutting itself yet again. “Many a truth is spoken in jest,” her grandmother had never missed

the opportunity to declare. *Thanks, Tita.* She sniffed, blotted her eyes with a napkin. Her mouth tasted copper with her blood. She dried her cheeks. Her stomach growled. The remainder of her uneaten meal was sitting on the passenger's seat. Before she could think better of it, she seized the rest of her bacon double-cheeseburger and devoured it in three ravenous bites. She nicked one of her fingers in the process, not to mention, her tongue, but she barely noticed, cramming onion rings after the burger, pulling the lid off her soda so she could gulp it down, crunching the ice cubes that slid into her mouth between her new teeth. There was no pain. There was only waiting for her hunger to catch up to the food she had sent its way. Even though doing so sliced another three fingers, she sucked ketchup and grease from them.

Fed if not full, she was calmer, ready for a new round of state-the-obvious. What had changed her teeth and what was changing her eyes was Sefira. Who could say if finding and dealing with her would have any effect on either of them, but really, what else was there for her to do? She reached for the key and started the car. The stereo blared, Lady Gaga declaring herself a freak bitch, baby. "You and me both," Lisa said. As she eased forward out of the parking space, she stretched her lips back from her mouth and tried to pronounce, "Double cheeseburger," as clearly as the new arrangement in her mouth would allow. She managed well enough for the drive-through window at McDonald's, she figured. The kids who worked those positions had to be accustomed to all manner of accents.

Talking to Gary, though, was going to be a challenge.

4

Only when a blurry glance at the clock radio showed the numbers turning to 8:40 did Lisa sit up in bed, wincing at the pain that flared behind her eyes as she did. "Shit." It was late, and her head felt as if a hangover had moved into it, a consequence of oversleeping. No doubt, when the alarm had beeped and she'd slapped at the radio, she'd turned it off instead of hitting the snooze button. There was barely enough time for a shower, coffee, and Greek yogurt if she wanted to make her 9:30 in Gardner. She turned to prod Gary. His side of the bed was empty. He must be up already, probably

engrossed in whatever his latest tech writing project was. Or constructing Sefira's website. *Shut up* , she told herself, and slid out of bed.

When she descended the stairs after a quick shower, though, her husband was nowhere to be found. Not seated at the kitchen table revising his latest project with an extra-fine blue pen, the way he liked to begin his mornings; not seated at his desk, either, typing his corrections into the desktop, NPR droning on the old transistor radio balanced on top of the bookcase; not even in the living room, watching TV, or sitting on the rocking chair on the front porch, his preferred locations if he was taking a break from working. Nor was there any coffee waiting in the pot; instead, she found a post-it note on the coffee maker. "Hey Sex Goddess," Gary had written, "Gone to Dunkin Donuts for morning treats. Back in a flash." There was no time indicated on the small yellow square. He could have written his message anywhere from ten minutes ago, when he'd heard her stagger into the upstairs bathroom, to an hour or two before, when he'd decided to surprise her with coffee and a toasted coconut donut. Whichever, he hadn't returned, while if she left in the next five minutes, she could stop at Stewart's for coffee and an apple fritter on her way to Mrs. Sanders's. She plucked the post-it from the coffee maker, reversed it, and wrote, "Hey Sex God—9:30 in Gardner—Couldn't wait—Sorry! See you tonight! Love, L" with the pen she kept in her front jeans pocket. Leaving the note on the kitchen table, she took her purse and keys and headed out the door.

She was expecting Gary to call her at some point during the morning, some version of, "I'm sorry, I completely forgot about your first appointment," likely in combination with, "The service at D&D was shit," and possibly, "You'll never guess who I ran into." But while her cell continued to trill throughout the day, it was not Gary, nor was his voice among those which left messages on her voice mail. Instead, she heard from every one of the eight women who'd called her over the past two days, as well as four others, pretty much the circumference of her circle of friends. The first couple arose from a delay in communication. They'd only been informed of Gary's previous rendezvous with Sefira this morning and had decided to go straight to Lisa. Especially with the space between her legs still pleasantly sensitive from last night's exertions, it was easy enough to repeat

yesterday's explanation. The remaining conversations proved more difficult to manage. For a second day, Gary had been spotted with Sefira.

Her friend, Liz, called while Lisa was driving from one appointment to another. She put the phone on speaker. "You bitch," Liz said.

Lisa half-laughed. "I'm sorry?"

"I thought we were friends."

"We are. What are you talking about?"

"I mean, I realize we haven't seen that much of each other since Brian moved in, but I've been really busy, honestly. I know it probably looked like I was blowing you off, but I wasn't, I swear."

"Liz, I—could you slow down? Please?"

"I was at your wedding, for Christ's sake. I designed your invitations. Didn't you think I deserved to know—for you to tell me, personally?"

"You lost me," Lisa said. "You completely lost me. I have no idea what you're saying."

"Gary," Liz said. "Gary and that—what did you say her name was? Cythera? Whatever. I had to go into town this morning to pick up canvases. I parked in the municipal lot, the one beside Prospero's. As I'm getting out of my car, I notice this couple a few cars over. They're making out like they're sixteen and their hormones are set on eleven. Except they aren't sixteen. For about a millisecond, I'm like, Okay, nice to see someone our age show a little passion. Right? Then I recognize them."

Already, Lisa had understood what Liz was telling her, the tone of her friend's voice, the gist of her questions turning Lisa's blood to ice water. She didn't need Liz to say any more, did she? But it was as if she were an actor in a made-for-TV movie about a wife whose husband betrays her, and this was her next line. She said, "What are you saying?"

"Seriously?"

"You saw Gary," she said, "with Sefira."

"It was like they were eating each other. I mean, get a room—which I'm sure they were about to, if they didn't do it right there on the blacktop."

"Huh."

“I just—how could you not tell me? When I talked to you the other night, I believed you.”

“Yes.”

“I was—I felt so embarrassed.”

“Sorry,” Lisa said.

All at once, she had to get off the phone. She told Liz she would have to talk to her later, she was at her next client, and disconnected before Liz could protest. The lie was white. She had another ten minutes before she turned into Mr. Spungeon’s driveway. She spent them gauging her reaction to Liz’s news. There had been three calls before Liz’s, none of them as damning, all confirming further contact between her husband and his client. They’d brunched at the Main Street Bistro (which, Liz had told her once, was where you went on Sunday morning to find out who had left the bars together Saturday night), window-shopped Main Street, and apparently browsed the erotica section at Prospero’s. Lisa had learned the day’s outfit, a loose white blouse, with skintight pants that Karen said looked like snakeskin, or alligator skin, some kind of reptile skin, and brown cowboy boots. Oversized sunglasses. She’d listened to a fresh round of opinions concerning how close Gary and Sefira had appeared (the consensus was very); although, mindful of her previous explanation, her friends had prefaced their observations with, “If you hadn’t told me there’s nothing going on,” and, “It’s a good thing I talked to you, because if I hadn’t,” and, “If I didn’t know better.” You couldn’t say that the trio of calls had in any way prepared her for Liz’s—you could not—it was more that the first one had sounded a note, something off-key, whose discord the subsequent calls had echoed and amplified, the vibrations of that collapsing note telegraphing a message she couldn’t decipher until Liz translated it for her. Liz, however, had leapt to an interpretation that, while reasonable, might yet be premature. Granted, Gary had been kissing Sefira. There was no point pretending otherwise. But there was no evidence that he had made the first move. It was possible that he had turned around and there she was. If she was as supercharged with sex as Lisa’s friends had testified, could she blame her husband if he responded to her?

This was perhaps the biggest surprise, that she would be so ready, so willing, to excuse Gary's behavior, to write him another pass. Had you asked her—well, this morning, sitting in the bed whose sheets were rich with the smell of sex, scenes from last night playing in her memory like her very own X-rated feature, she would have told you flat-out that there was no way Gary would even think about doing anything with Sefira, let alone actually putting his mouth on hers. Please. Nor would her sentiments have been appreciably different following the first report of Gary and Sefira lunching at the Bistro. Even when her cell was trilling a fourth time, after those additional descriptions of Gary and Sefira's further activities—even when she was pressing the answer icon on the phone's screen—while she would have allowed the possibility of Gary's attraction to Sefira, this woman who apparently walked around in a cloud of desire, she would have insisted the chances of that attraction morphing into action were so small as to be not worth consideration; albeit, with a stridency that would have betrayed her growing unease. Now that she was in possession of evidence that directly contradicted such an insistence, she still was not ready to assume the worst, a worst that threatened so much more than any lap dance ever had.

The day's remaining toll of messages and conversations made her hesitation seem less prudent reserve and more desperate denial. No one else had quite as incriminating evidence to offer, but there were two sightings of Sefira hanging on Gary's arm, and one of him with his arm around her shoulders, as well as a less-than-reliable glimpse of the two of them driving east out of town in Gary's green Subaru (the same direction as all five of the town's motels, not to mention, the Cusp). Though she could feel the emotions darting around her on insect wings, neither pain, nor anger, nor grief had descended on her by the time she had finished with her last client and started home. Instead, she was as confused as she ever had been, as if each successive call had cast another veil over the situation, the kind of thing you'd expect if you flipped to the back of an advanced calculus textbook. From the way it was written, the layout of the numbers and symbols on the page, you knew generally what it was and what it was intended to do, but try to solve it, and you might as well use your pencil and paper for doodling. There were way too many blank spots in your

knowledge for you to have any hope of figuring it out. She could hear Janice deriding her naïveté, but she couldn't conceive that, after last night, Gary could go out this morning to be with someone else. As far as she was concerned, one event precluded the other.

If she was hoping for clarification from her husband, however, she was disappointed. The moment she turned up Farber, she saw their driveway was empty. Of course, there was nothing wrong with his car. Of course, she was not going to find him waiting in the living room with an explanation that would reconcile last night with today. But she called out, "I'm home," as she opened the front door, anyway, and when there was no reply, went from room to room saying, "Gary? Honey?" Only her voice, ringing on the walls, met her. Her search finished upstairs, in the bedroom, and at the sight of the bed, its tangled and stained sheets like an abstract painting of last night's passion, a tremendous sadness coalesced inside her, just below her heart, as if there were a heavy rock there, pulling her down, onto the bed. The pain, anger, grief that had flitted around her were caught in the sadness, encased in it, as were most of her thoughts. She sat on the edge of the bed as the air flared with the sun's last light. She sat there as the air charred, grew gray and dim. She sat there as gray darkened to almost-black, as the room lost form and definition around her. She sat with that rock in her chest pulling everything into itself, every stray memory, excerpt of conversation, fragment of image. Gary said, "Hey, dirty girl." The wedding cake smeared her fingers as she wiped it across his mouth. "It's on Farber, in town." The roller climbed the wall, leaving a trail of white paint. "I think he has some new ideas about heaven." His cheeks reddened.

When the house phone rang in the kitchen, she was off the bed and down the stairs two and three at a time, nearly losing her footing as she skidded into the kitchen. Blood pounding in her ears, she seized the receiver. "Hello?"

So prepared was she for the caller to be Gary that, for a moment, she could not understand what she was hearing. A deep, soft sound, intimate as a breath blown in the ear: a woman, saying, "Hello? Gary? Is Gary there?"

And she knew, from that voice like honey cloying the tongue, she knew. The stone in her chest fractured with an almost audible crack. She said, "Who is this?" but it was a formality, a line to advance the dialogue.

“No,” the woman said, “he isn’t there, is he?”

“No.”

“He hasn’t been there all day, has he? All day, and allllllllll night.”

What time was it? From where she was standing, Lisa couldn’t see the coffeemaker’s red digital numbers. “Who is this?” she said. “Sefira?”

The voice inhaled. “Why, you know my name.”

“Yeah,” Lisa said, “I’ve heard all about you.”

“From Gary?”

“Among others.”

“I see. Your hubby didn’t tell me he’d shared so much with you.”

“He’s a regular font of information.”

“Does that mean he told you how he fucked me until he was raw and red? And how, even then, when the skin on his cock was peeled and bleeding, he bent me over one more time?”

The fragments below her heart ground together. Mouth dry, she said, “No —he neglected to mention that charming detail.”

“Did he? Would you like me to fill you in?”

“I’ll pass, thanks. It sounds like there’s been enough filling in, already.”

Sefira laughed, molasses bubbling in a saucepan. “You are clever,” she said. “I like that.”

Great , Lisa thought, *she’ll be trying to seduce me, next. Two for the price of one.* “Why am I talking to you?”

“Because your husband’s in no fit state to drive. He needs you to come get him.”

“Why would I want to do that?”

“That isn’t for me to say, my dear. Perhaps you don’t. Perhaps you’d prefer him to stay where he is.”

“With you.”

“For the moment.”

“Oh? Done so soon?”

“Yes, actually. Gary’s been a lot of fun. The things your hubby did to me—really, they’re nothing compared to the things I’ve done to him, but he is a *nasty* boy, and I appreciate that. I’m sure you do, too. Nasty or not, though, I have other appointments to keep. So many men and all that.”

The fragments had turned to lava; suddenly, she was gripping the phone so tightly she heard the plastic creak. “Why don’t you stay there, so I can kick your ass?”

“That’s cute. You’ll beat me black and blue and then what? Throw your husband over your shoulder and ride off into the sunset. All forgiven and forgotten; boys will be boys?”

“Why don’t you let me worry about that?”

“Oh you poor, sweet thing. Shall I tell you what would happen? The next time you fucked—sorry, *made love*—you wouldn’t be able to stop thinking about him and me, wondering, *Was he like this with her? Did he grab her ass like that? Did she teach him to do that with his tongue?* And the answer to all those questions would be, *Yes*. Yes, yes, and yes. It doesn’t matter if you hang up the phone and do your best to forget you were ever married, or if you and Gary were to have a miraculous reconciliation. I will always be in your bed. You will never escape me.”

“Who are you? Why did you do this?”

“Why don’t you ask your husband? He sought me out.”

“That’s a lie.”

“Ask Gary.”

“He already told me you contacted him about designing your website.”

“Me? Why would I need a website?”

“For your business—what is it? That New Age shit, right? Tarot, crystals, demonology?”

“All interests of mine, yes, but I’m hardly in one place long enough to set up a business. With all the lies he’s told you, you can’t accept one more?”

“Where are you?”

“So you are coming for him.”

“I didn’t say that. I just want to know where you are.”

“1430 Wycombe Road. It’s—”

“I know where it is.”

“Very well.”

“In fact, I’m guessing I can be there in about five minutes.”

“Oh?”

“I wonder how long it’ll take you to gather your shit and get out of there.”

The line went dead. Lisa sprinted for the door, grabbing her handbag from the hall table on the way.

5

As her first day of driving drew to a close, in the parking lot of a Day’s Inn on the outskirts of Watertown, Lisa’s cell sounded. She didn’t recognize the number. Sefira, calling to taunt her? She decided to let whoever it was say whatever they had to say to her voice mail. However, the phone kept up its song, which was strange, because she had emptied her mailbox, and even if she hadn’t, by now the person on the other end of the line should have heard a message telling them to try again later. Was her phone crapping out on her? Given everything else that had occurred the past couple of days, it wouldn’t be a surprise; if anything, it was perfectly in keeping with the flaming car wreck her life had become. She didn’t bother removing the phone from its dash mount. She tapped the screen and said, “Hello?”

Gary said, “Hi. It’s me.”

Of all the possible responses to hearing her husband’s voice, she would have ranked humor low if not at the absolute bottom of the list. Yet raw, hysterical laughter burst from her in a torrent. Through the laughs, she said, “You have got to be fucking kidding me.”

There was no reply.

“What are you doing?” she said.

“I’m calling with information about Sefira.”

The name stilled her hilarity. “What information is that? How to give a blowjob that’ll leave your man begging for more? I read that issue of *Cosmo* , thanks.”

“I have the next set of directions for you.”

“No, you don’t,” she said. “Madame Sosostris is going to phone with those.”

“What did she say?” Gary said. “She said she would ensure you received directions every day. She didn’t say she would be the one delivering them. Because of… everything, I have a connection to Sefira. I know the route she’s taking. Madame Sosostris says it’s legit.”

“This…” Lisa blew out a breath. “You can appreciate how fucked-up this is, right?”

“Yeah. I’m sorry.”

“Whatever.” She leaned over, dropped the glove compartment, found a pen and a form letter from some charity or another searching for cash. “Okay. Which way is the bitch headed?”

The route Gary detailed took her back over the Adirondacks, all the way south to Newburgh, and west across Pennsylvania, to Pittsburgh. When he said, “That’s it. That’s as far as I can see,” Lisa said, “Are you sure about this? I just spent today driving up to this place, and now you’re telling me to turn around and pretty much go back the way I came.”

“I’m sure.”

“How am I supposed to trust you? How am I supposed to know this isn’t a plan you and Sefira came up with together?”

“You can trust my desire for self-preservation.”

“Seems to me it’s your desire that got us into this shit storm,” Lisa said, and before Gary could reply, cut the connection.

He phoned the next day as she was speeding toward Pittsburgh. “I’m still driving,” Lisa said. “Call me back in an hour.”

“I can’t,” Gary said.

“What do you mean, you can’t?”

“This link opens once a day,” Gary said, “and then it’s gone for another twenty-four hours. It’s kind of a ‘the-stars-are-in-alignment’ deal. When the call breaks off, that’s it.”

“Seriously?”

“According to Madame Sosostris, this is how it works.”

“Hang on.” There was a rest area ahead. She steered off the highway into it, rolling to a stop in a parking slot near the toilets. She yanked the parking brake, but left the engine running. The day’s directions were lying on the passenger’s seat, along with the pen she’d used to record them. “Just a second.” She reached above her to the dome light, switched it on, wincing as radiance filled the car. She picked up the envelope, leaned it on the steering wheel, and grabbed the pen. “Go ahead.”

The roads Gary reeled off were local, a network of narrow routes that would take her over West Virginia’s mountains to eastern Kentucky. “A lot of them are pretty windy,” he said. “You’ll need to be careful.”

“Uh huh,” Lisa said, writing down the last of his instructions.

There was a pause, then Gary said, “Do you have everything? Do you need me to repeat any of it?”

“I’ve got it.”

“Good,” he said, “good. Well… that’s all, I guess.”

“Yep.” She replaced the envelope and pen on the passenger’s seat, clicked off the dome light.

“Unless there’s anything else.”

“Like what?”

“I don’t know. How are you holding up?”

“There’s something wrong with my eyes.”

“What do you mean?”

Irritation stabbed her. “Never mind,” she said, and ended the call.

Gary asked about her eyes the following night. A not-insignificant part of her was gratified by his interest, was tempted to detail the changes occurring beneath her corneas. What a relief it would be, to talk to him. Only a few days ago, the two of them had been sitting at the kitchen table, the cartons from their preferred Chinese takeout standing open, discussing the latest adjustments in coverage by an insurance company she billed to. It was one of the things she liked best about marriage, the conversation with a person who knew you as well as anyone, informed by the people the two of

you knew, the places you'd been together, the experiences you'd shared, all forming a kind of shorthand unique to your relationship. *And where does fucking Sefira fit into that?* She heard the question in her sister's voice. Whatever urge she felt to confide in Gary withered. Again, she ignored the question and disconnected.

For the next two calls after that, Gary was curt, listing the roads she was to take, then hanging up on Lisa before she could hang up on him. When she realized that he was upset with her, a blend of amusement and anger pulled her mouth into a smirk to which it returned throughout her drive up and down Illinois and across the Mississippi onto St. Louis's humid streets. Always, it had been one of Gary's talents to turn any situation in which he was to blame back on his accuser, employing a species of rhetorical jiu-jitsu he had developed as the middle child of five siblings in a large Irish Catholic household. Usually, he achieved this by going on the offensive, complaining about the way he was being treated, or finding an accusation to hurl in response to whatever complaint Lisa had against him. Sometimes, though, he chose silence, elaborate, extended silence, theatrical silence, maintaining it until Lisa broke down and half-apologized for accusing him of anything in the first place. It was maddening, but it happened infrequently enough not to concern her. Even if she were inclined to indulge him now, which she absolutely was not, she was far too tired to do so. Locating a motel in St. Louis seemed an impossibly complicated task. She found a McDonald's, drove to a dark corner of its parking lot, far from where clouds of insects swarmed the tall halogen lights, killed the engine, and reclined her seat as far as it would go.

Already, sleep was tugging at her. She closed her eyes. *You know Gary's going to call any minute, now ,* she thought, but the certainty was not enough to halt her descent into the unconsciousness closing around her like black water. There was a moment of dissolution, of feeling everything, her fears, her anger, her hurt, the very self that threaded them together dissipate that was wonderful.

Distantly, she heard the phone warbling. She opened her eyes, saw the phone in its mount at one end of a black tunnel. She went to lift her right arm, but it was sluggish, leaden.

From the passenger's seat, a voice said, "Don't worry. I've got it." A hand with long fingers and nails slid into view and tapped the screen. Gary said, "I'm sorry it's so late; there's something weird—" and the voice cut him off. "It's me, Gary," it said. "Fuck off." The hand ticked the phone, ending the call.

Lisa tried to speak, but her tongue refused to move. *Sefira* , she thought.

"That's right," the voice said. "I came to have a look at you."

How…?

"Gary has a connection to me. He also has a connection to you. Therefore, you and I are connected. It's simple math. Well, it's not that simple. Nor is it math, really. What it is, is exciting. Do you know what it means for him to have lain with you, after he had tasted the pleasures I had to offer? It's a sign either of great love, or of the most intense hatred."

Or overwhelming horniness.

A laugh that was as full and rich as honey being poured over warm bread. Despite herself, despite everything, Lisa found it one of the sexiest, the most erotic sounds she'd ever heard. "There's that, too. I'm pretty sure your hubby doesn't hate you, which leaves love as the explanation. Together with the urges of that lovely cock."

Lisa strained to turn her head, could not.

"Don't bother," Sefira said. "You are in my power and all that."

Why are you here?

"I told you: I popped in to see you. In the flesh, as it were."

Why?

"Because you are something new. You must understand, I have been doing this for a very, very long time. I won't bore you with the story of my origin; honestly, there's plenty of it I don't remember. I've seen the pyramids at Giza when they were new, encased in white limestone, brilliant in the sun. I've picked my way through waterlogged corpses on Crete, after the sea rose up and drowned them. I've heard the creak and splash of the oars when the Achaeans sailed for Troy.

“You get the idea: I’ve been around. In that time, most of the men who have come to me have stayed. And by most, I mean ninety-nine percent. More: I mean ninety-nine point nine nine nine… Ninety-nine point a hundred nines, a thousand. Granted, given the number of years I’ve walked this plane, that still means a few dozen who have not succumbed to me immediately. Some killed themselves. Some tried to kill me, an ill-advised move on their part. Some fled to their wives or mistresses, and this fascinated me. Why go back to them, after having sought me out in the first place? Your joke aside, there is no lust I cannot sate. To know me is to know that I have no equal.

“All the same, they rose from the bed we’d shared and departed. This leaves hate and love for explanations. I understand hate, the urge not just to stick the knife in, but to turn the wrist, to drag the blade through the viscera, spill it steaming onto the dirt. Where I come from, it’s the emotion underneath… everything. Love, though, I am less certain of. Sometimes, I wonder if it’s what I feel towards them, the men who seek me out. Not in the way you love Gary, but as the hunter loves the stag into whose heart she shoots her arrow. I know, you’ll say it’s not the same thing. Probably, you’re right. You can understand, though, how it would intrigue me, this impulse, or habit, or whatever it is that allows even a small number of my partners to walk away from me. I should say, attempt to walk away from me, since I always reel them back in, in the end. The women for whom they thought they were forsaking me—none of them has survived long, after I have brought their men to me the second and final time. Some discover what I’ve left of their lovers and are driven to madness, suicide. Some never see their men again, and are soon consumed by what has been passed on to them. I’ve watched those women, revealed myself to a couple. After meeting me, one walked off a cliff. The other ran into a field and was gored to death by a bull.

“Of that tiny number, however, not one has threatened me with violence, let alone, undertaken to pursue me. In my experience, you are unprecedented. I doubt you can imagine how thrilling that is. This existence… I would like to say it’s a series of unending games of chess, but it tends to be more in the vein of checkers and occasionally, tic-tac-toe. No matter that every seduction were a chess match against an outstanding opponent, the game

remains the same, the board the same number of squares stationed with the same distribution of pieces, each with its designated moves. You'll say that there are hundreds of thousands of possible combinations of moves, that the devil lives in the details (sorry), but however true such an argument might be, it loses its force after the first couple of millennia. You want to know what eternal torment looks like? It's repetition, doing the same thing over and over and over and over."

Gary might want to talk to you about that.

The laugh. "My dear, Gary's suffering hasn't begun, not truly. Once I'm home… Anyway, the point I'm trying to make is, you have disrupted what has become an exceedingly familiar routine, and that is marvelous. Whether you'll survive what's happening to you, I have no idea, though it would be a shame if you didn't. Should you catch up to me, which you very well may, you won't be so fortunate, but just the same, I hope it happens. You deserve it, as a reward for your hard work.

"And I'll admit, the prospect of the pain it will cause you, to die at the hand of the one you've chased this far, for this long, your quest unfulfilled, makes me tingle. That's a new kind of agony, and I cannot wait for it."

I'm going to kill you , Lisa thought, and for the first time since accepting the butcher knife from Madame Sosostris felt absolutely certain that she would, felt as if Sefira's words had uncovered something jagged within her, swept the soil away to reveal rock jagged and unforgiving.

"That's the spirit."

Lisa's right hand whipped out in a back-fist that slammed against the passenger's seat with sufficient force to make it shudder. From behind her, Sefira said, "Very impressive." Lisa's vision dilated. She twisted to face Sefira, but the back seat was empty.

"I'm going to kill you," Lisa said. Her voice was loud, hoarse. "I am going to fucking kill you."

There was no answer. Sefira, it appeared, had vanished. In the passenger's seat, the notepad on which Lisa had been recording Gary's directions since running out of room on the envelope was open to a fresh page, which was covered in her handwriting. She held it up to view, read a fresh sequence of roads. Another ploy by Sefira? If she could do whatever she'd just done,

then surely it wouldn't be too hard for her to leave a false trail. Yet the route led west, into Kansas, and swung northwest, into Colorado, which seemed approximately right. *Therefore, you and I are connected.* "I think we are," Lisa said.

Despite his protestations that he couldn't, she half-expected Gary to phone a second time, especially since he'd heard Sefira's voice. He did not. When she answered the phone the following night, Gary was already talking, asking her if she was all right, apologizing for not being able to call back, reminding her that he could only communicate with her once a day, repeating how sorry he was for this, for all of it, asking again if she was okay. She waited for the torrent of questions and justifications to slow before saying, "I'm okay."

"Thank God," Gary said. "She was actually in the car with you?"

"Kind of."

"What do you mean?"

"It was weird. I heard her voice and I saw her hand, hanging up on you. You heard her, too."

"I did, yes."

"But when I took a swing at her, she wasn't there."

"You—what did she want?"

"To mess with my head. To tell me how old she is, how thrilled she is to have me chasing her, because it's such a change from her normal routine, but she's still going to win. Oh, and there's more suffering in store for you."

"Jesus. You said you tried to hit her?"

"I did."

"And you're sure you're okay?"

Briefly, Lisa weighed describing the day she had endured, her eyes feeling as if someone had dumped sand in them. Instead, she opted for, "I'm fine. I'm just tired. Tell me where I'm going tomorrow."

At the end of the latest set of roads, Gary said, "You're all right? Really?"

"You do realize the plan is for me to confront Sefira."

"It's—if anything were to happen to you—"

“Then you’d be fucked in an entirely new way, wouldn’t you?” Annoyance surged in her and, before he could reply, she hung up.

His next call, Gary was subdued, contrite. Her mouth still smoldering from the inferno that had swept it, Lisa kept her responses to his questions about her day, how she was holding up, if she’d had any more contact with Sefira, to a minimum. Finally, he said, “What is it? Why won’t you say anything?”

“Because it hurts,” she said. “It hurts to talk. My teeth are a mess, you asshole. Now give me the Goddamn directions, so I can stop talking.” Which, chastened, he did. Afterward, he said, “I’m sorry about before. I didn’t realize… your mouth—” The concern lowering his voice made her eyes unexpectedly moist. “It’s fine,” she said, and broke the connection. Blood dripped from her lips; she wiped it with the back of her hand.

Never one for heights, Lisa was less than thrilled with the following day’s route, which took her from Denver to Estes Park, and from there up into and through the Rockies. No highway, the road she drove was two lanes. As the altitude increased, it was bordered on the left first by blue spruce and fir and heavily overgrown meadows, then by short, steep slopes studded with boulders, then by carved rock face. On the right, fir and pine alternated with an ever-higher drop off, the stone guard wall from which appeared neither tall nor sturdy enough to prevent her car from tumbling into open space. Across from the mountain on whose side she was driving, she wasn’t sure how far away, another mountain reclined, its long slope side grooved by the enormous rock slide at its base, its pointed peak like the comb of an enormous beast, its size, its mass, barely diminished by its distance, the sky seeming to gather over it like a mantle.

Making matters worse, Lisa was stuck in a line of slow-moving traffic, everyone’s progress delayed by the fawn-colored RV rolling along eight cars ahead. No doubt, the surrounding view was impressive, but when the RV followed the road left around a curve, it opened a vista which made the route appear to lead straight into empty sky. An optical illusion, yes, but one convincing enough to make her palms slick. A couple of hundred feet before the bend, the nominal shoulder belled around an improbable rest area, its parking lot jammed with the cars of those standing photographing the scenery. She considered pulling off at the spot, decided against it. It wasn’t as if she could turn back; what couldn’t be cured must be endured;

sooner war, sooner peace; pick your empty aphorism. She did her best to keep her eyes on the car directly in front of her, not to watch the sky as it wheeled overhead, its blue so deep she could almost see the black pressing behind it. She drove as close as possible to the center line, which placed her unnervingly near the traffic coming the opposite way. An oversized pickup rushed by, its slipstream jostling her car, and she fought the urge to swerve to the right, toward the minimal guard wall and the emptiness beyond, because she was momentarily certain she would oversteer, not lift her foot from the gas in time, and crash straight through the stone barrier into the high air. Why wasn't the CD player on? However slight, its distraction would have helped to ease the dread whose fingers were constricting her throat. If only she were in one of those cars with audio controls set on the steering wheel's arms, she wouldn't have to remove her right hand from the wheel to bring Dolly's voice into the car, a task at the moment impossible, a labor Hercules would have declined. On the far side of the guard wall, dense forest filled the bowl of the valley dizzyingly far below.

Now she was riding on top of a ridge, short spruce like Christmas trees hemming her in, flooding her with relief. Had she ever imagined she would, or could, be made so happy by the sight of trees? But any sense of shelter the evergreens provided was short-lived, as they came to a halt at treeless slopes, a Kelly green terrain falling off on the left, to another valley, beyond which stout mountains crowded. She passed a pull-off, this time on the left, its parking spaces full. Beyond it, a pair of metal gates, long inverted triangles, stood open to either side of the road. *For the snow ,* she thought, *to close the road if it's too dangerous*. Emerald fields unfolded around her. An elk grazed in the distance. The road slanted down through successive notches in the rock, past a stone hut whose function she could not identify. To her left, the terrain plummeted to a bowl brimming with dark green forest. To her right, the ground dropped away, as well, leaving her driving along the spine of a mountain, a flea running along the back of a horse. Ahead, the road swept up and over the side of the next peak. A couple of cars in front of her opted to stop at the latest parking area, but the tan RV maintained its position at the head of the line, and would continue to do so for the remainder of Lisa's time on this road. Surely, there had to be a quicker way for its driver and passengers to reach their destination. If they

had opted for this route to enjoy the scenery, then shouldn't they have taken advantage of one of the many rest areas they'd passed? Its reasons its own, the great box trundled on, keeping everyone behind it at a steady, slow speed, drawing out what already would have been a long drive into an exercise in endurance. When at long last the road descended from the high mountains and Lisa's turn appeared on the right, she raced onto it so fast her tires screamed on the curve. The road slid through steep canyons, paced fast-moving streams, ran across dense fields overseen by single mountains. Under other, better circumstances, she might have admired some of it, or even all. Not now: now, she wanted to hear the engine growling, to feel the wheels humming on the pavement, the gearshift vibrating under her palm, the dread that had enveloped her burning off, trailing behind her like a plume of heavy black smoke.

When the phone rang that night, Lisa was soaking in a bath as hot as she could stand it in a room at the Holiday Inn in Laramie. The cell was propped on the lid of the toilet, within easy reach; she leaned out of the tub and answered it. There was a pause, then Gary said, "It's me. Are you all right?"

If she spoke slowly and carefully, she could talk. "I'm okay."

"Oh thank God," he said, the words breaking. "I thought—I don't know what I thought, but it wasn't good. How's your mouth? You said there was something wrong with it."

"There is." She slid back into the hot water.

"What is it? What's happening?"

"My teeth, they're… I'm changing. There's something going on with my eyes, too."

"Changing? What do you mean? How? What's happening?"

"I think I'm becoming more like Sefira." She laughed without humor. "Worst STD ever."

"I didn't—I mean, I didn't know—I never meant—"

"Just… don't."

"I never intended to hurt you. Which sounds—I realize how it sounds. But I love you, Lise. You have to believe, I would never do anything to harm

you.”

For once, the first words to rise to her lips were neither sarcastic nor bitter. “I wish I could believe that. Which sucks.”

“It’s true.”

“The thing is, I keep asking myself, ‘If he didn’t love you, then what have the two of you been doing for the last eight and a half years?’ All of it can’t have been a lie, can it? I mean, you hardly married me for my money. But if I’m right and you loved me, how do I explain Sefira? It’s not as if she swept in and seduced you. You sought her out. So what’s the answer, Gary? How can both of those things be true?”

“Because what I have with you is real. Sefira was a mistake.”

“That’s a hell of a mistake.”

“I’m not arguing with you. I fucked up, big time.”

“Why? What was it about us—about me—that made you look for someone else? And I hate having to ask that. I resent having to doubt myself, to doubt what I thought we had.”

“I don’t know,” Gary said. “Didn’t you—I mean, weren’t you ever curious about what was out there? I’m not talking about online dating, I’m talking about…”

“Porn.”

“Yes. And no. Not the professional stuff. Although maybe some of it. Among other things. Are you sure you want to hear this?”

All at once, she did. “Yeah.”

“I wanted to see what there was to see. It was online; I figured it would be safe. I was looking, not touching. Every now and again, I would decide this was enough, I needed to stop, and I’d clear my browser history, stay away from those parts of the web for a couple of weeks, a month. Inevitably, though, I went right back to where I’d been. This was how I found Sefira’s page. Actually, it was another site that led me to her. I’d searched for ‘forbidden desires.’ The results took me to a page called blackguide.com. It seemed to be for people interested in the occult. The design was weird, tiny red print on a black background, with gifs of laughing skulls and hissing snakes. Amateur, but kind of sinister, too. There was a link at the bottom of

the page: ‘Fulfill Your Wildest Fantasies with Sefira.’ I clicked on it, and a window opened. It showed a white screen with a cursor blinking in the middle. Had it not been for the cursor, I would have assumed the link was dead. I was about to close the window when I decided to type, ‘Hello’ and see what happened.

“Right away, there was an answer: ‘Hello.’ Not the most original response, but it was enough to prompt me to continue. I wrote, ‘Who is this?’

“‘Sefira. Who is this?’

“‘Gary,’ I typed.

“‘Why are you here?’

“‘I’m looking around,’ I wrote, which was bullshit, because I’d already seen what there was to see of the site.

“‘What do you want?’ the page asked.

“‘What are you offering?’ I typed. I was starting to suspect I was talking to some kind of chat-bot. When the question repeated, the suspicion intensified. I was annoyed, more than I should have been. It wasn’t the first time I’d encountered this type of set-up. I wrote, ‘Hot talk,’ which I was pretty sure would cue the bot to take me to the next page. But no, it asked me a third time, ‘What do you want?’

“So I told it. I typed in every sexual fantasy I could think of, from I want to watch myself having sex in a mirror to I want to do it dressed like Batman and Batgirl. All the search terms I had ever entered came pouring out of my fingers. I kept thinking I’d reach the character limit, but it let me keep going. I wasn’t expecting a reply. Mostly, I was being a dick.

“Except it worked. After I hit enter, there was a pause, long enough for me to congratulate myself on having overwhelmed the bot, and then it said, ‘My, that’s an awful lot. Where would you like to begin?’ Immediately, I understood that there was a person on the other end of the connection. If I was being truthful with myself when I said that I was only at these sites to see what there was to see, then this was the moment for me to close the screen. I didn’t. It wasn’t long before my cock was out and I was jerking off to her responses. I want to tell you I was plagued by guilt afterward, and I was aware of having crossed to a very dangerous place, but what I mostly

felt was this kind of exhilaration. It was like, I had finally done it, I had experienced what was out there."

"You do realize," Lisa said, "plenty of people masturbate to online chat. It may be tacky, but it isn't especially high on the list of transgressive activities."

"I understand that," Gary said. "I guess it says something about how buttoned down I was. Remember, when we first started having sex, I used to shower once we were done?"

"Yeah," Lisa said, "I used to tease you about it."

"'Did I make you *dirty* ?' you'd say."

"And you'd say, 'Not dirty enough.' I never believed you. Looks like I should have."

Gary paused. "Honestly, I should have believed what I was saying. Or taken it seriously, admitted it to myself, talked to you about it. In retrospect, it seems absurd that I didn't. I was just so embarrassed—embarrassed and ashamed by my own desires."

"I can't understand that," Lisa said. "I mean, it was sex. There was nothing to be self-conscious about. And it was me. You think there was anything you couldn't have told me?"

"Yes," Gary said, "I did. It's like, there was an image you had of me—or, an image of me I thought you had, I wanted you to have, and I was terrified to jeopardize it."

"Well, you didn't have to be."

"I guess so. At this point, it's all a bit academic, isn't it?"

"Finish your story."

"There isn't a lot more to it, not really. I communicated with Sefira for a couple of weeks. During that time, I kept waiting for her to ask for a credit card number, which I swore to myself would be the red line, the sign to break off contact. She didn't. Instead, she told me she was going to be passing through Huguenot in a few days, and asked if I wanted to meet for coffee. I said yes. I wish I could say I hesitated, but I didn't. Oh, had anyone asked, I would have said that coffee didn't mean sex, but I would have been lying, to them and to me. I was more anxious that our meeting

wouldn’t lead anywhere. There were moments I seemed to see myself from a distance and I’d panic, thinking, *What are you doing? Stop this.* But I’d continue with whatever activity I was in the middle of, say, withdrawing money from the ATM in case we needed a motel room. (I didn’t want to use a credit card, leave a paper trail, and the places I figured we’d go to weren’t very expensive.) A couple of times, I felt sick to my stomach at what I was contemplating. *How do you think this is going to turn out?* I asked myself. It wasn’t that I didn’t care. It was more a case of, I’d set something in motion, and I couldn’t stop it. I’d been standing at a ledge, I’d taken a step off, and now my balance was gone, and my other foot was about to follow.

“And before you say it, I understand I was rationalizing, treating as fact what was choice.

“Anyway, I met Sefira at Pete’s. She was waiting for me. My first thought when I slid into the booth across from her was, *She’s hideous*. I’m not talking about an abstract, moralistic judgment. I mean a physical response, repulsion. It was as if I saw through her protective camouflage to her, to what she was. There was a second I could have left, and I almost did. By this point, though, I was committed to staying for at least a cup of coffee. My reaction, I chalked up to nerves.

“The true revulsion came later, after we’d left Pete’s for four hours at a room in the Park motel on 9W. Five minutes of conversation with Sefira had transformed repugnance into desire. As repelled by her as I had been, now I wanted her more than I’d wanted any other woman, ever.” Gary hesitated. “I’m sorry—”

“I get it. You wanted to fuck her, and you did. A lot.”

“Yes,” Gary said. “While I was… with Sefira, I felt fantastic, liberated. The minute I dropped her off in Huguenot and headed home, however, I was filled with such regret, such remorse, I nearly drove straight into the nearest tree. It was as if I’d spent the afternoon drunk and sobered up in an instant. I wanted to throw up. All I kept thinking was, *What have you done?* I tried to tell myself it was no different than that lap dance at the Cusp, only a matter of degrees, not kind, but however much I wanted that to be the case, I knew it was bullshit. I didn’t know what I was going to do. I considered telling you right away, confessing everything the moment you stepped

through the door, but I chickened out. I was certain what I'd done was written all over my face. At dinner, though, when you asked me about Sefira, I had no problem lying, and you accepted my explanation without a question."

"That's because I trusted you."

"I know—I knew this, and I was sure I was done with Sefira. I had made a terrible mistake, but if I didn't repeat it, maybe things could still be okay."

"Except that you did repeat it."

"The next morning, I panicked. It occurred to me that, were I to blow off Sefira, she might find a way to contact you and reveal what I intended to keep secret. We had agreed to meet at Starbucks. I thought I could talk to her, explain that yesterday had been fun, but I wasn't up for anything more. If I'm being honest, even in the midst of my alarm, there was a small part of me that wanted to see Sefira again, that was hoping I'd overcome my anxiety so we could spend another afternoon together."

"I'll avoid the obvious joke about your small part."

Surprisingly, Gary laughed. "Yeah, I walked into that one."

"Ran full tilt, more like." Absurdly, she smiled. "Keep going. You and your small part met Sefira at Starbucks."

"She was waiting there for me. The place was crowded, which I was aware of today in a way I hadn't been yesterday. I guess because now I was trying to extricate myself from the situation I'd been only too happy to rush into. Sefira was pleasant, but reserved, almost formal. Considering our recent activities, there was something off about her manner, strange. It was hard to believe she could be having second thoughts, too, and yet this was exactly the impression she gave. I wasn't sure how to proceed. As we drank our coffee, she told me she had the sense I hadn't enjoyed our time together. Which was—I couldn't say where that idea had come from. As I recalled it, I had been very… appreciative. No, Sefira said, she had failed. Usually, her lovers stayed with her until it was time for her to depart. I had left her; therefore, something had been lacking. Nothing was lacking, I said, everything was terrific. I was confused. When I had paid for the motel room (the place had hourly rates), I'd asked for two hours. Sefira had said, 'Only two?' and I'd doubled the time, which had appeared to please her. Nothing

she said while we were at or on our way back from the motel had led me to believe she expected us to spend the night together.

"Our conversation took us from Starbucks to Pete's. Over lunch, I reassured her that she was terrific, the sex had been amazing, we'd done things I had only dreamed of. The more I described the previous day, the more my regret and panic subsided, and were replaced by lust. Long story short, I talked myself into a return visit to the Park motel."

"Which was exactly what she wanted. She picked up on your doubt and adapted to it. She played you."

"I figured that one out myself, thanks."

"After a second debauched afternoon."

"It may have taken me a little longer."

"Seriously?"

"I've never been especially good at this stuff."

Lisa sighed. "Moving along. You fuck her, you come home, where I'm guessing you're assailed by remorse, which you assuage by fucking me later that night." Saying it out loud did not make the chain of events feel any better.

"More or less."

"Then the morning you ran out for a cup of coffee, a couple of donuts, and some wake-up sex with Sefira."

"I left—it was before sunrise. When I slotted the key in the ignition, I had every intention of driving to Dunkin Donuts and straight home again. For most of the car ride, I thought that's where I was headed. It was like, I was seeing the route I was taking, but it wasn't registering, you know? I was just distracted enough to steer out of town and north on 32. I made the right onto Wycombe—basically, only when I was turning into that house's driveway did I realize I was nowhere near where I wanted to be. I had the idea I should reverse out of here and head back into town. Instead, I put the car in park, leaned over, and opened the passenger door. Sefira emerged from the house and slid into the car. I drove her to town, we walked for a bit, I drove her back to the house, and… I want to say you can imagine the rest, which to a certain extent is true, but I'm not sure I can convey the way

everything felt. All of it took place while I was in the same disconnected state. Somewhere in the back of my brain, there was a voice screaming that this was wrong. The same voice noticed a change in Sefira. The first day, she had been charming, the second, vulnerable. Today, she was aggressive, predatory. Looking at the curl of her lip, feeling her nails digging into my elbow as she chaperoned me around Huguenot, listening to the razor edge in her voice, I had no doubt something bad was on its way.

"I was right. But you know that. I swear, all this—it feels as if I stumbled into an especially heavy-handed cautionary tale, the kind of thing you'd find in a church pamphlet, the Perils of Internet Porn or something.

"The point, though, is that the reason Sefira put me through what she did on the third day was because I kept returning to you. You know what she is. She isn't used to anyone doing anything other than surrendering to her. According to Madame Sosostris, her keeping me subject to her will cost Sefira a lot in terms of energy. But since I'd wounded her pride by resisting her, it was worth it."

"You resisted, all right."

"Come on," Gary said. "You know what I mean."

There was an angry retort waiting for him, and one for his next reply, and another for whatever he said after that. There was a sea of fury heaving within her, like the magma ready to shatter the top of a volcano. There were words, sentences, to scar and shrivel and crisp him, and there was something else, as well, a sense that she could reach out through the same connection allowing their conversation and hurt Gary, punish him, turn her recriminations to fire and agony. She was aware of something shifting within her, down in her bones, which felt as if they were cracking, opening like the petals of a bizarre flower. She remembered yesterday, the sulfurous cloud she'd drawn within her. Now it was venting from her marrow, bubbling in her blood, pushing out of her pores. Her head swam. It was as if the cloud were solid, her body smoke. Her rage swelled, rose in a towering plume—

"Lisa?"

—and collapsed like a failed soufflé. It wasn't that she couldn't stay mad at Gary. The anger roiling within her would have a half-life of years, decades,

maybe a lifetime. Nor was it that he was right. She couldn't accept his limping home after his motel romps with Sefira as a sign of his undying love for her. All the same, knowing what she did about Sefira, it was difficult for Lisa to dismiss Gary's interpretation of events entirely. Wasn't her anger an indication that her feelings toward him were not as simple as she wanted them to be? What was the saying? The opposite of love isn't hate, it's indifference. She certainly was not indifferent. Jesus: how fucked-up could things become between two people and you could still say they were in love?

Gary might not be right, but he wasn't wrong, either, not exactly, and the gap between the two was sufficient to cause the wrath boiling in her veins to subside to a simmer, retreat to its home in her marrow. Lisa swallowed and said, "Just tell me where I'm going."

On other occasions, Gary would have attempted to continue the conversation, forcing a prickly exchange into an outright argument, which might have led who could say where? This time, he said, "All right. You have a pen?" She did, with her notebook next to her phone. Gary reeled off the directions that would take her across Wyoming and into Montana. Once he was finished, he said, "Tomorrow."

"Tomorrow," Lisa said.

"Drive safely."

"I will." She had the sense he was building up to a declaration of love. Before he could, she leaned out of the tub and ended the call.

The bath had cooled. She stood, reaching for a towel. *Tomorrow*. A mix of eagerness and dread met the thought. She winced as the towel dragged over her knuckles, still raw and sore. Whatever the outcome, it would be a relief finally to face Sefira, and not another of her minions.

6

Lisa had never been what anyone would have described as a fast driver, let alone, a reckless one. Janice, who had taught her to drive, had complained about her younger sister's timidity from their first lesson in the parking lot of the Newburgh Mall. "For God's sake," she'd said, "don't drive like

you're afraid of it." In the intervening years, anytime Janice was in the car with her, she never missed the opportunity to confirm her initial assessment. "Jesus!" she'd half-shout, "It's the long skinny one to the right, Lise." Or, "I was hoping we'd get there sometime this week." Or, whenever Janice was especially frustrated with her, she'd quote George Carlin: "Christ almighty! You drive like old people fuck, you know that? Slow and sloppy." It hadn't taken Lisa long to learn that appeals to safety, the posted speed limit, or insurance rates counted for nothing with Janice. Nor was refusing to respond much use: her sister would continue her tirade until well after they had reached their destination. About the only reply she'd found effective was telling Janice to fuck off, which usually bought Lisa enough angry silence to guarantee a quiet remainder of the trip.

Now, though, Janice would have beamed with pride—assuming she recognized the woman behind the wheel of the Accord as her little sister. Lisa backed out of the driveway so fast the tires spat gravel at the garage door. She stomped the brakes, whipping her head against the headrest, jerked the gearshift into first, and literally put the pedal all the way to the metal. Engine roaring, the Honda leapt down her short street. At the intersection with Old Soldier's, she was already in fourth, spinning the wheel to the right, the stop sign little more than a red distraction. The rear end of the car wobbled as it made the turn. Lisa downshifted to third to bring it under a semblance of control, then up through fourth into fifth as she rushed past the stop signs marking the intersections of a half dozen other streets with this, the principal bypass around Main Street and its assorted businesses. A pair of headlights flashed by on her right. In the ten seconds it took her to reach the t-junction with 32, the speedometer's needle arced smoothly up to fifty and was closing on sixty. Almost at the larger road, she stood on the brake, put in the clutch, and pulled the steering wheel hard to the right. Tires shrieking, the Accord slid sideways onto 32. For an instant, an SUV reared in her windshield, horn blaring like a panicked beast. Lisa dropped the car into third, hit the gas, and swung to the right. The SUV banked to its right, into the parking lot of the cell phone store, fortunately empty at this late hour. She shifted up and sped north.

She was not thinking. She wasn't even thinking, *I'm not thinking*. She was not hearing Sefira's syrupy voice saying, "All day, and alllllllll night." She

was not picturing Gary, naked, his cock half-raised and streaked with blood, his hands on the hips of a lithe naked woman, turning her around, bending her over. She was not smelling the rich funk of sex, the thick mix of sweat and semen. She was feeling the steering wheel thrumming against her palms. She was listening to the engine whine. She was watching the space the headlights cleared in front of her, trees, mailboxes, the ends of driveways flickering in and out of view at its margins.

Wycombe was two miles outside of town, on the right. She reached it in just over a minute. The reek of burning rubber filled the car as she braked hard and made the turn. The road rose alternating between slope and flat. She took them all at the same speed, the Honda lifting on its suspension as she crested each rise. A side street opened on the left. Two houses past it, the number 1430 glowed on a battered mailbox. She stomped clutch and brake, spinning the wheel left. There was an interval of time, some portion of a second, a half- or quarter-, during which the driver's side wheels raised from and threatened to leave altogether the unpaved driveway, to begin a sequence of events that would end with the Accord on its roof in the house's front yard. Then it passed, the car settled, and she was bringing it to a halt, yanking the parking brake, almost snapping the key off as she pulled it from the ignition. A glance at the house showed the silhouette of a split-level. From what she could see, it was unlit, so she left the car's headlights on. She flung open the door and was two running steps before she realized she'd left her handbag on the front passenger seat—her handbag in whose interior pocket was zipped the can of pepper spray she intended to empty into Sefira's face, and possibly Gary's, too. She doubled back to the car.

So much for the element of surprise. She ran up the front walk, left hand holding the handbag's strap against her chest, right hand inside the bag, tugging at the zipper to the pocket. Although—she hadn't seen Gary's Subaru or any other car in the driveway, or parked in the road. Her pace slowed. Her fingers had found the pepper spray, but she left it where it was. *Great. Wild goose chase, anyone?* What were the odds Sefira was speeding along the Thruway, on her merry way to another waiting husband?

Which begged the question, where was Gary? With Sefira? She had claimed she was done with him. Was she lying? If so, why? There hadn't been time for her to change her mind, had there? Or for Gary to convince

Sefira to take him with her? Maybe he'd chased after her, or driven off in another direction.

You're here. You might as well check out the place. She was at the front door. She tried the doorknob. The door swung in with a creak straight out of the soundtrack of a classic horror film. She leaned forward, saw a bare landing. One short flight of stairs descended to the basement, another ascended to a large open space with a vaulted ceiling, the living room, from what she could see empty of furniture. Should she call out, announce herself? Was there any need to? Her arrival had probably woken half the neighborhood. It wouldn't be a surprise if someone called the cops. *Time's a-wasting*. She stepped onto the landing, pushing the door shut behind her. To the right, there was a light switch, but flipping it produced no result. She had left her cell, with its flashlight app, in the car; she would have to explore the house with the light admitted by the curtainless windows. Wincing as they sounded her passage, she climbed the stairs and walked to the center of the living room. A pair of dark rectangles on the wall opposite the front picture window marked the spots where photos or paintings had hung; otherwise, there was no sign the living room had been in use anytime in the recent past. The same was true of the dining room beyond it, and the kitchen past that, and the trio of bedrooms and bathroom off the short hallway on the house's other side. As she went, she worried less about the noise of her sneakers on the floor, opened each closed door with less hesitation, became less concerned about Sefira leaping out at her, a knife or other weapon in hand. In the months after their marriage, she and Gary had looked at a couple of places like this, before deciding to remain in their condo and save for a house more in line with what they wanted, some kind of farmhouse with a barn and a couple of acres. Had she seen a For Sale sign at the edge of the lawn? Not that she could remember; though she hadn't been on the lookout for one. Well and truly irritated, she returned to the front landing. Now that her eyes had adjusted to the gloom, she could see that the air appeared brighter by the slightest of degrees at the foot of the basement stairs. She pictured a single candle left burning beside a mocking note. The temptation to leave, to stride out of this place, get in car, and head home, where she would put on a pot of coffee and start

researching divorce lawyers, was strong enough to put her hand on the front doorknob.

The next moment, she was descending the stairs, shaking her head at her compulsiveness. To the left, a pair of closed doors. Directly ahead and to the right, the basement was a large open space; a family room, she supposed. At the other end of the room, Gary lay with his back to her, in front of a pair of sliding glass doors. A trio of candles burned most of the way to wax puddles surrounded him. Except for his boxers, he was naked. At the sight of him, something inside Lisa twisted, and she had to fight to keep herself from running across the room and kicking him, all the while shouting, “You fucker! How could you?” Instead, she took a deep breath and started slowly toward him, as if she were in a museum, taking her time to admire the paintings crowding its walls. *Dignity* , she thought, *even in a situation like this, you can have dignity.* All the same, she slid her hand inside her bag, fingers searching for and finding the cylinder of pepper spray. *Dignity does not preclude revenge*.

Maybe halfway to Gary, who had not moved at the squeak of her soles on the linoleum, she noticed a faint, metallic odor that reminded her of raw steak. *Blood?* The nearer she drew to Gary’s (still unmoving) form, the sharper the smell grew. *Blood*. Although her eyes saw only the candlelight flickering on Gary’s bare flesh, throwing shadows across the floor, the walls, her nose told her the air was as full of blood as a slaughterhouse. It was as if each step were covering more ground than it appeared, plunging her deeper into the smell of gallons of blood, buckets of the stuff splashed everywhere around her, on the floor, the walls, up against the sliding glass doors, over Gary’s prone form. Her pulse pounded at the base of her throat. Had Gary blundered into an encounter with a serial killer? The copper odor coated the insides of her nostrils, sat red on her tongue. Yet there was no blood visible, as if the wavering glow of the candles was obscuring it. Though she was practically standing over him, Gary remained motionless. Lisa extended her right foot and pushed the nearest candle out of her way.

With a groan, Gary sat up and turned to her, exposing the gaping ruin of his chest.

Lisa screamed, leaping back from him. “What the FUCK?” she shouted. “What the FUCK?” Her eyes bulged, her hands clutched her hair, the pose

of a comedienne in a fifties sitcom.

Gary attempted to stand, couldn't. The center of his torso was split apart—not cleanly, but as if an animal, a bear perhaps, had cracked his breastbone and ribs and pried them apart haphazardly while it rooted for the delicacies underneath. Ribs whole and broken arced away from the ragged and bloody cavern from which his heart and other organs (his liver? Intestines?) had been excavated. (*That's a lung*, she thought, *I am looking at a fucking* lung.) Half-dried blood smeared the skin around his open mouth, under his nose; blood saturated his boxers. His eyes were rolled under his lids, which fluttered over the whites as if attempting to sweep some debris, a piece of dirt or an eyelash, from them. Ribs scraping and clicking against one another, he stretched his left hand toward Lisa, who retreated a half-dozen steps that would have been the start of her flight out of the house had Gary not immediately collapsed onto his back and lay there motionless.

Once, during her karate class, an opponent in what was supposed to have been a friendly sparring match had thrown a sidekick which struck her solar plexus dead on, dropping Lisa to the mat. Her lungs felt as if they had seized, and no matter what she did, she could not make them work again. A switch had been flipped off, one she did not know how to turn on again. Of course she panicked, but the emotion seemed to be happening at a remove, on the other side of the blow continuing to send shock waves through her. Eventually, the instructor had realized what had happened and rushed to her side, but in the ten seconds it took him to do so, she was reduced to a series of blown neurons, unable to transmit information and action back and forth. This was how she felt now, her vision full of the catastrophe of jagged bone and ravaged flesh that was Gary. Lips trembling, she forced her breath into a single word: "Gary?"

He did not answer. Was he dead? How could he be anything but? Yet he had sat up, had responded to her presence. If he was dead, how was that possible? Lisa had heard stories of corpses several hours or days old moving, the accumulated pressure of the gasses built up within their forms causing motions ranging from the minor to the dramatic. But the violence visited upon Gary was fresh; nor could she see any means for anything to remain trapped in him. A last impulse held onto until she appeared? That wasn't possible. His injuries were too much, devastating. Then what…?

As if a river of electricity were passing through him, Gary's spine arched, throwing his head back, lifting his hips and thighs. A chorus of cracks sounded from his chest. His arms hung limp to either side; his heels quivered and thudded on the floor. Lisa screamed, jammed her hand into her bag for the pepper spray. *Jesus! What now?* From his open mouth, Gary's voice emerged, high and faint, as if crossing a wide gulf. At first, Lisa couldn't pick out individual words in the babble pouring from him. Whatever he was saying might have been a recording played too fast. Then it found its proper speed, catching him mid-sentence: "dark, so very very dark, dark sky no stars, dark smoke, smoke from the fire, fires, all the fire, fire rivers, fire lakes, fire mountains, keep away from the fire, keep away from *them* , so hard, ground sharp, can't run, run from *them* , from the hives, run, can't run, run, can't, you must, you must run, don't let *them* catch you, take you into the hives, don't, run, run—" Whatever current was surging through him ceased, and he smashed against the floor.

This time, though, his face retained its animation. His head lolled in Lisa's direction. His eyes rolled from under the lids, found and focused on her. His tongue pushed between his lips, dragged over them. In a voice not all the way back from wherever it had been, but closer, much closer, a room or two away, he said, "Lisa?"

"Gary? Are you…?" She couldn't think of a way to complete the question. Are you okay? was ridiculous; are you alive? was nearer the mark but absurd to imagine asking.

"I'm fucked," Gary said, which Lisa supposed was as accurate a description of his situation as any. "I can't—how long have I been here?"

"I don't know," Lisa said. "Most of the day, maybe."

"A day?"

"Not even."

Tears mixed with blood streamed from his eyes. His mouth contracted in horror. "Not even? I was there for—it was months, at least. Maybe a year. When they took you into the hives, it was hard to keep track of time. Harder. But it was longer than a day, it had to be. Please tell me you're lying to me."

“I’m not,” Lisa said, unable to believe that she was carrying on a conversation, however fragmented, with a man whose chest was a gory cavity.

“Oh God,” Gary said, weeping, “oh God oh God oh God. I can’t go back there. I can’t.”

“Where? Where were you?”

“Hell,” Gary said. “I was in Hell.” He sniffed. “Or… I don’t know. Please, you have to help me. I know, I know I’ve done something terrible. I know I betrayed you. I’m sorry. I’m so… so sorry. But please help me. Please. Don’t leave me here. Don’t.”

“I don’t know what you’re asking. What is it you want me to do? How am I supposed to help you?”

“While I was there,” Gary swallowed. “While I was in Hell, I heard things. Secrets, rumors. There are people, people who know about where we were.”

“What? Priests, ministers?”

“No,” Gary said. “No. Other people.”

“All right. One of them could help you?”

“Maybe. It’s the only thing I can think of.”

“Okay. Where’s the nearest person? Can you tell me that?”

“In town,” Gary said. “Madame Sosostris. It’s what she calls herself. She tells fortunes. On Main Street. In the big purple house beside the plaza. The one with the deli and pharmacy.”

“That place?” Lisa knew the location, a rambling, two-story farmhouse set back from the road between a pair of enormous poplars. The siding was purple, the trim violet. A flagstone walk led from the sidewalk to the front porch. The path was lined with slender metal rods, each of which was capped by a pinwheel in the shape of a different bird. When the wind blew, their wings spun. From the porch ceiling, blown glass globes hung on silver wires. A hand-painted sign on the front lawn advertised psychic readings from someone whose name Lisa had always been driving too fast to discern; Madame Sosostris, apparently. The house had seemed to her intended for the weekend tourist crowd, up from the City to indulge their appetites for the bucolic, as well as those locals for whom the New Age was

a thing. Asked to pick the residence of someone with the kind of knowledge to which Gary was referring, she would have put the purple house near or at the bottom of her list, too blatantly obvious a choice to be believed.

Apparently, though, the obvious answer was the right one. Gary said, “Yes. Maybe.”

“What if you’re wrong?”

“I don’t know. Please, Lise. I know. I fucked up. But this—” He nodded toward his opened chest, wincing.

It took her less time to reply than she would have predicted. “Yes,” she said. “I’ll take you to this Madame Sosostris.”

“Oh thank you,” Gary said, fresh bloody tears spilling over nose and cheeks. “Thank you thank you thank you. You have no idea what this means.”

“We need to get you out of here.”

“If you can move the other candles—it doesn’t have to be much—you’ll break the rest of the containment. I should be able to stand up and walk out of this place.”

“Are you sure? You aren’t going to…”

“I’ll be fine. What Sefira did to me holds me together. Or so I heard.”

“Let’s hope you heard correctly.”

With the side of her sneaker, Lisa shoved each of the remaining candles from its position. Gary shuddered, uttered a low moan. He appeared in control of his body, again. His voice had moved, not all the way back to his throat, but within the same room, somewhere close, an arm’s length away. He turned on his left side, propped himself on his left elbow, attempted to push to his feet with that arm, which appeared to be stronger. He couldn’t manage it. He looked to Lisa, who hesitated before holding out her hand for him. Though his grip was strong, his flesh was cold, dead.

7

The first man came for her in the parking lot of a sprawling truck stop on the south side of Pittsburgh. She parked at one end of the enormous

rectangle, next to a line of eighteen wheelers whose engines rumbled as if they were snoring. Tempted as she was to recline her seat and surrender to the fatigue pulling at her, dull hunger prompted Lisa to open the door and step into the night. Diesel fumes fogged the air. In the distance, the steady flow of traffic on the highway made a hollow, ghostly sound. For a moment, she leaned against the Honda and closed her eyes. She had been driving so long that, standing still, she continued to feel herself hurtling forward.

"Ma'am, are you all right? Ma'am?"

She glanced up and saw a big man standing in front of her, an expression of concern on his wide face. A foot taller than Lisa and at minimum a hundred pounds heavier, he was wearing a red plaid shirt, its buttons strained against the belly overlapping his jeans. A white captain's hat rode the waves of his curly blond hair.

"I'm fine, thanks," she said. "Just been on the road a while."

"I know how that feels," the man said. "Say, your name wouldn't happen to be Lisa, would it? Lisa… Murray?"

"Yes," Lisa said. "How—"

But the man's hands were already around her throat, so fast she was grabbing his wrists before she understood what was happening. His strength was terrifying. Immediately, she released his wrists and felt for the thumb of his right hand. His face had not lost its worried look. She pushed her fingers against his thumb, but his grip would not allow her to work under it. She needed a new plan, and quickly: blackness crowded the edges of her vision. The man's arms were too long for her to jab at his eyes. She let go of his hand and dropped to the ground, dead weight. Surprised, the man stepped forward, tilting over in an effort to maintain his hold on her. He could not. His fingers loosened, and Lisa swung her forearms up into his wrists, breaking the choke. The sensation of relief was instant, but there was no time to savor it: the man was reaching for her hair. She flattened against the pavement and kicked her right foot. With an audible crunch, her heel connected with the inside of her attacker's left knee, bowing his leg outward. He gave a high-pitched yelp and lost his balance, raising his arms too late to prevent his forehead from thumping off the side of the Accord.

Lisa scrambled from the ground as he collapsed, stunned, the captain's hat rolling from his head under the car.

There was no way the man was returning to his feet, not after what she'd done to his knee, but she backed away from him all the same. Incredibly, her handbag had remained on her shoulder. She dug inside it, searching for the pepper spray. Her assailant did not stir from where he had fallen. In the deep shadows cast by the tall halogen lights stationed around the parking lot, she could not see whether or not the man's chest was moving. *So what?* she thought, rubbing her throat. *The guy tried to kill me.* If he wasn't breathing, too bad for him.

Except, he had said her name. This wasn't some random attack; it was a trap, one Sefira had laid for her. How she had known Lisa was going to pull off at this particular truck stop, she had no idea; though it was hardly the most remarkable event of the last couple of days. Her fingers had found the pepper spray. She withdrew it from her bag and, aiming the nozzle at her attacker's face, slid her feet closer to his prone bulk, ready for him to lunge at her. He remained motionless. She squinted, unable to decide whether his chest was rising and falling. A vision of him split the way Gary was, the buttons of his shirt concealing a bloody hollow, swam before her. She shook her head and prodded his left arm with the toe of her sneaker. No response. She pressed harder, saying, "Hey. Hey, you."

The man groaned, a sound of deep hurt. Relieved, Lisa retreated a couple of paces, depositing the pepper spray in her bag. For a moment, she considered running to the truck stop, summoning aid. A tractor trailer rolled past the front of her car. *And you're going to say what, exactly? This guy slipped and hit his head on your car? What about his knee?* Suppose the man regained consciousness, accused her of breaking his leg? Of course she would counter that she had acted in self-defense to an unprovoked attack, but there would be no way for the police not to be involved. She would have to provide a statement here, then likely at wherever the police station was. She would have to explain why she was so far from the home address she provided them. Even if the cops were as sympathetic and helpful as was possible, their attention would add hours to a timetable already precarious. She sighed.

Her phone was in the front pocket of her jeans. She retrieved it and searched for the local area code. When the 911 operator answered, she said, “You have to help—there’s a man lying on the ground and he isn’t moving—I think he might’ve had a heart attack—you have to send someone—he isn’t moving,” all in a breathless rush. As the woman on the other end of the line told her to calm down, asked her where she was, Lisa said, “In the parking lot of the truck stop off I-80, the big one, in one of the spaces between the trucks—please, he isn’t moving—what if they don’t see him, and he gets run over?” She broke the connection while the operator was asking, “You said a truck stop?”

She guesstimated she had at most a minute until a police cruiser put in an appearance, sweeping its searchlight over the rows of idling eighteen wheelers. Caution still the order of the moment, Lisa circled to the Accord’s passenger door and let herself into the car on that side. She climbed into the driver’s seat, started the engine, and lowered her window. Leaning her head out of the car to check her distance, she eased past her attacker. She heard a crack as a tire broke the plastic rim of his captain’s hat. Once she was clear of him, she sped out of the truck stop. Accelerating onto the interstate, she checked the rearview mirror and saw a Pennsylvania State Trooper’s gray SUV slowing down the off ramp into the parking area.

Although she intended to put an hour (minimum) between herself and the site of her attack, Lisa took the next exit because her hands started to shake with such intensity she could barely control the steering wheel. The honey-roasted peanuts which had served as a late afternoon snack hours earlier burned in her gut; the road in front of her wobbled. At the stop sign at the foot of the ramp, she turned left on to a road lined by vacant lots, its pavement punctuated by clumps of grass. A quarter mile along it, a small, single-story building, its windows boarded, stood in the midst of one of the lots. After making certain there was no one behind her, Lisa steered off the road and drove to the other side of what looked as if it had been a fast food restaurant, a regional answer to McDonald’s or Burger King. She pulled in close to the place, parked, and slumped against her seat. The nausea had not yet subsided, and her arms and legs seemed rubbery. *Adrenaline crash* , she thought. She closed her eyes and concentrated on keeping the contents of

her stomach in place. She soon fell into the sleep she had been resisting at the truck stop.

The following day was spent checking her eyes to monitor the blackness spreading over her irises, worrying about the pain that had started in her teeth, and navigating the twisting West Virginia roads onto which Gary's directions had set her. It wasn't that she didn't want to think about what had happened in the shadows between the tractor trailers; it was that the previous night's assault, her response to it, seemed unreal, dreamlike. Adding to the sense of unreality, the skin of her neck was unbruised, despite the terrible pressure the man's fingers had exerted on her throat. She sped through dense stretches of aspen, ash, and oak broken by occasional clearings in which stood a variety of houses: great log cabins whose sides were freshly stained; small saltbox cottages whose roofs were furred with moss; split levels whose yards were full of sandboxes, swing sets, and toys. A small girl wearing a pink tutu and green camouflage pants waved to her from the front stoop of a red brick house. Every now and again, a detail from the struggle in the parking lot barged to the front of her mind, the creamy smell of the soap with which her attacker had washed the hands he was using to strangle her, the shudder that had traveled her leg when her foot struck his knee, the momentary thrill that had swept her when he had fallen to the pavement. In the interest of fitness, she had been taking karate two or three times a week for the last three and a half years, and while the class was focused more on exercise than self-defense, every so often, the instructor would spend part or even all the fifty-minute session discussing and demonstrating what to do in the event someone laid hands on you. Lisa had followed the lessons with the rest of the students, but without any expectation of ever using the techniques they were learning. Although she knew the statistics when it came to violence against women, she felt self-conscious practicing to escape a choke, break an assailant's knee. The clients she worked with were generally in no condition to hurt anyone, and she hadn't been worried about Gary; indeed, he was the one who had purchased the pepper spray for her, filling out the paperwork necessary to do so in New York at the Gander Mountain in Wiltwyck. (Was that irony, or something else?) Yet when she had needed it, the knowledge was there for her. She hadn't expected the man in the captain's hat to grab her, but wasn't

that the point? It was hardly a surprise to learn that Sefira's powers extended to the ability to bend a man to her will, but it was significant that she had placed him at the truck stop to ambush her. When she asked Madame Sosostris whether Sefira would know she was being pursued, the woman shrugged and said, "It's difficult to say for sure. I would operate under the assumption she will." *Guess we've settled that question*. Would Sefira know her pawn had failed? *Best to assume yes*. Best, too, to be prepared for another threat.

It came sooner than she would have predicted, the same evening, outside a gas station bathroom into which she'd gone for a round of vigorous brushing of her aching teeth. This man was smaller than the other, smaller than Lisa, dressed in khaki overalls and a white t-shirt. He was standing near the door, shuffling his feet in what she judged a grown-up version of a child's pee-pee dance. The bathroom was one-toilet-fits-all, so she didn't register anything unusual about his presence until he looked at her from under his heavy brows and said, "Mrs. Murray? Mrs. Lisa Murray?" Amazing the power of social conventions: while one part of her was noticing the man's right hand in his pocket, another, automated part of her was answering, "Yes?" Had the knife the man started to withdraw not snagged on the material of his overalls, she would have been in serious trouble. As it was, she leapt back into the bathroom, slammed the door shut, and shot the bolt. She had turned out the light over the sink on her way out; she left it off.

Shouting, "Mrs. Murray! Mrs. Lisa Murray!" the man hammered the door, rattling it in its frame. Lisa dug through her handbag, the darkness rendering its contents strange under her fingertips. The man's blows resounded in the bathroom's small space. Could he break down the door? It seemed sturdy enough, though its hinges screeched ominously with each of the man's strikes. If nothing else, he was going to attract additional attention any second now. The pepper spray was in her grip. Heart thudding, she positioned herself to one side of the entrance and reached over to unbolt the door. At the click of the lock releasing, the man ceased his pounding. "Mrs. Murray? Mrs. Lisa Murray?" He turned the doorknob and pushed the door open, admitting a bronze column of late day sunlight into the room. Standing flat against the wall, her right hand holding the

metal cylinder at head level, she waited as the man called, “Mrs. Murray? Mrs. Lisa Murray?” She was hoping for him to lean his head over the threshold. Even better, he advanced two cautious steps into the bathroom, his clasp knife out before him like a flashlight. She allowed him one more step, then said, “Hey. Over here.” He turned his head toward the sound of her voice, and she discharged the pepper spray into his face in a hissing jet. He jerked back, twisting away from the spray, but enough of the stuff spattered his eyes and nose for him to drop the knife and jam the heels of his palms against his face, bellowing as his eyes ignited with pain. Even standing on the opposite side of the pepper spray, Lisa felt her eyes flood with tears. There was no point attempting to inflict further injury on the man: the searing in his eyes would keep him out of commission long enough for her to escape. She slipped out of the bathroom, shutting the door behind her, and walked to her car at what she hoped was a normal pace. Once she was behind the wheel, she removed her sunglasses to dry her eyes; though they continued to tear for a little while thereafter.

This time, the shaking did not begin until she was over the Kentucky border and saw a yellow Motel 6 sign rising high in the distance, washed gold by the last of the sunset. She parked in front of the main office and sat there with her head against the headrest. *A knife* , she thought, *the guy had a fucking knife.* She saw it in his hand, a short, shining blade curved at the tip like a miniature scimitar. *A knife*. Yes, the first man had employed his hands to frightening effect, but a knife was something else, a dramatic escalation in threat. *What’s next, a fucking gun?* And what was she going to do if someone aimed a pistol at her? She had used up the pepper spray, and to buy a new one, she would have to locate a store that sold guns (she assumed: that was how it worked in New York—maybe things were different in Kentucky?), which would consume more of the time of which she had so little. No matter that a firearms dealer appeared at the side of the road. She suspected she would have paperwork to complete, which no doubt would require ID to verify, and how was she planning to explain her New York State driver’s license to the salesperson standing behind the display case? Driving this internal debate was the threat for whom the new pepper spray would be necessary, the as-yet blank silhouette of her inevitable next assailant. If Sefira’s hope was to hurt or kill her, she was

failing. If, however, her intent was to intimidate Lisa, make her doubt the path she had set out on, then mission accomplished.

Gee, Lise, way to overthink things. It was one of Gary's go-to expressions whenever she expressed anxiety about her job, the state of their savings, whether or not they should have kids. As often as not, she found his laid-back attitude frustrating and more than a little patronizing. All the same, she recognized in it a certain useful balance to the excesses of her own frantic tendencies. This was no less the case now, but the irritation it stirred in her was considerably sharper than usual.

Silly to sleep in the parking lot of a motel. Her legs were strong enough to carry her out of the car and through the office's glass doors. The front desk clerk, an older African-American woman whose hair was in braids, asked Lisa if she was all right. She had been watching her sitting in her car, she said, and had been getting ready to come see if she needed any help.

In the neutral tone of the woman's voice, Lisa heard more skepticism than concern. Was she, the clerk was asking, on drugs, or drunk? "I'm so sorry," Lisa said. "I'm diabetic, and I'm afraid I let my blood sugar drop a little too low." Her explanation appeared to satisfy the woman, who said there was a vending machine outside where she could buy a candy bar if she needed one. Lisa thanked her, and finished filling out the registration form the woman had slid across the counter.

In her room, Lisa switched on the TV and ran through its complement of channels. Nothing caught her interest long enough to still her thumb on the remote. Nor, despite the softness of its mattress, could she settle on the queen-sized bed. She contemplated calling her parents. She hadn't spoken with her mother for the better part of a week, which was about the limit before one of them (Lisa) was supposed to pick up the phone. Her parents' thirty-fifth anniversary was approaching in a few months, in December, and she was supposed to be consulting with her mother about guests for the celebration Mom insisted was unnecessary. (Janice was no help with this. "If she says she doesn't want a party," she said, "then I'm going to take her at her word." Which might be rational, but which willfully ignored everything they knew about their mother.) The prospect of speaking with her, though, was exhausting, as there was no way she could tell her what was happening. Should she offer the merest hint of any trouble between her

and Gary, Mom would spend the remainder of their conversation attempting to extract the details from her, which of course she couldn't provide, so Lisa would have to invent another narrative, the details of which would be simple enough for her to remember when next she and her mother spoke, and the time after that, and so on, indefinitely, and the idea of having to do now what she had done so often as a teenager was overwhelming and depressing. Better to wait until this mess was over, and accept her mother's reproaches for her thoughtlessness.

That was assuming, of course, her quest succeeded. Should she fail, she would not be speaking to anyone. Her most recent conversation with her mom, which had consisted principally of her mother relaying the story of the Alaskan cruise she and Lisa's father had taken in anticipation of their anniversary, with a few remarks about prospective guests for the party Lisa wasn't putting together, would be their last. At the beginning of the call, her father had answered the phone and they had exchanged their usual few sentences; those would be their final words to one another. Sorrow unexpected and acute dried her mouth, tightened her chest. They would have no idea what had happened to her; all they would know was that their younger daughter had disappeared under mysterious circumstances. The same thing would be true of Janice, with whom she'd last spoken a few weeks ago, a brief, frustrating exchange during which Janice had once again refused to help plan their parents' anniversary party. Those terse exchanges would have no sequel.

When Gary called, in addition to not answering his questions about the changes affecting her eyes, Lisa did not mention either of the men who had attacked her. In large part, this was due to her annoyance with him, sharpened by the realization about the possibility of not speaking to her family again, which manifested in a desire to punish Gary by withholding from him information he was not aware of. She refused to allow him the pleasure of worrying about her (any more than he already might be). As far as reasoning went, it was far from her proudest moment, but it was satisfying in a passive-aggressive way. Beyond that, she remained uncertain how much she could or should trust the man whose engagement and wedding rings she had yet to remove, despite having promised herself to do countless times. After what Sefira had done to him, the savagery she had

visited upon him, it was difficult to believe Gary was in league with her. Yet consider the men Sefira had set on Lisa: clearly, she possessed the ability to control them. Who could say she wasn't exerting such power over Gary, Madame Sosostris's assurances to the contrary? If he was under Sefira's sway, possibly communicating with her through occult channels, then the less Lisa told him, the better. All of which exacerbated her annoyance.

The next morning, Lisa wiped her fingerprints from the empty pepper spray canister and deposited it in one of the green dumpsters behind the motel. She had no idea whether either man she had bested, or both, would have reported her to the police, but if the cops were on the lookout for her, she figured it would not do to be stopped with incriminating evidence. Her route took her through eastern Kentucky's dome-like mountains on local roads, through small towns wedged into narrow valleys, beside farms where fields had been plowed up steep slopes, past brick churches with signs advising, "Stop, Drop, & Roll Won't Work In Hell" and "Remember: Satan Was The First To Demand Equal Rights." She tried to recall what little she'd learned about confronting an opponent armed with a gun. If you are far enough away, run in a zig-zag pattern, because hitting a moving target is much harder than you would guess from TV and movies. If you are close, move closer, quickly, out of the line of fire. Attack and hurt the arm holding the weapon, but more importantly, incapacitate the person wielding it with an elbow to the face or throat. Considering her instructor had spent a single class on the technique, Lisa was amazed at how much of it she had retained; though recalling a slow-motion lesson in a dojo was different by several degrees of magnitude from using it against a man deliberately attempting to shoot you.

Eventually, the landscape relaxed into long, rolling hills as she approached Lexington, where she drove past the front entrance to Transylvania University, the name of which caused her to do a double-take. When she verified it, she muttered, "Seriously?" wondering if Sefira was mocking her. Throughout the day, stopped for lunch at a rest area, eating dinner at a Waffle House, and finally at the Day's Inn in Paducah where she took a room for the night, her eyes were watching for anyone approaching her, her ears listening for anyone calling her name. No one did, but she took scant

comfort from it. Sefira, she assumed, was varying the tempo of her attacks, not allowing Lisa to grow comfortable anticipating them.

During the following day's drive up and down the length of Illinois, and across the Mississippi to St. Louis, she also went unassailed. That night, however, Sefira chose to visit Lisa in her car, and while it wasn't exactly a physical assault (although apparently Sefira could paralyze her, however briefly), it was a dramatic escalation of her psychological campaign. Lisa wondered if the irritation that plagued her eyes the succeeding day, slowing her process across Missouri to Kansas, and from Kansas to Colorado, was connected to Sefira's conversation with her. Certainly, the sensation of grit in her eyes distracted her from the men moving around her at the truck stop where she pulled in for a BLT and fries at Denny's and to gas up the Accord. Not until they were far too near did the men's presences register, too late to have avoided injury had they struck at her. She returned to the road with the feeling of having escaped a situation more precarious than she had fully appreciated. Despite the pledge she made to herself to maintain her vigilance, Lisa was caught off guard in the parking lot of the restaurant at which she ate lunch the following day. Her almost fatally delayed reaction she blamed on her teeth, whose deep constant hurt had outpaced the effectiveness of the Extra-Strength Tylenol she was taking to dull it. A former 1950s style gas station painted turquoise, the restaurant sat on the right side of the road Lisa had been driving for the last hour. A freestanding sign in front of the building gave its name as Vernon's, and advertised American, Italian, and Thai food. Hungry and curious, she turned into the narrow parking area and pulled up next to the only other vehicle in the lot, a sand-colored Ford Explorer. The interior of the place was strung with multi-colored Christmas lights, its walls decorated with murals of green hills topped by Romanesque temples. Without looking up from her phone, the tall teen-aged girl at the front register, her face draped by the long black hair hanging straight down either side of it, mumbled that Lisa could sit wherever she wanted.

A rudimentary idea of caution informing her choice, she opted to sit in the corner diagonally across the room from the entrance, a position which allowed her to keep an eye on the door to the kitchen, too, behind which she heard movement, clattering dishes. The tables were foldable. She had to

scoot to the edge of the molded plastic chairs to eat her Pad Thai. The food was good enough to take her mind off the discomfort in her mouth. While she ate, she studied the girl, who had returned to her position at the register and who appeared oblivious to her attention. She was wearing faded jeans and a hooded sweatshirt washed from black to dark gray. Everything about her, from the nondescript clothes, to the way she wore her hair to obscure her face, to her mumbled speech, suggested someone trying desperately hard not to be noticed, which stirred memories in Lisa of her middle- and high-school years. Unlike the girl, she had dressed in whatever fashions were the latest uniform, been a member of the cheerleading squad, worked on her junior and senior prom committees. Yet her goal had been the same, to evade detection, only by hiding in plain sight, her camouflage so obvious it would never be noticed. At the heart of her behavior had been a deep loneliness the source of which she could not trace. Once, she had asked her sister if she ever felt that way, but Janice snorted and told her to get over herself. She hadn't bothered speaking to either of her parents about it. After she departed high school for college, and then college for a job and a marriage, the emotion gradually receded, leaving as mysteriously as it had arrived. She suspected a psychologist would identify the feeling as typical of adolescence, though such an explanation did nothing to diminish her almost visceral recollection of the emotion. As the girl removed her plate and offered her the desert menu, Lisa felt the urge to reassure her, tell her everything was going to be all right. She resisted the impulse, which was good, because she could imagine the sarcastic response it would evoke. Not to mention, sometimes things didn't turn out okay. There was disappointment, illness, accident, death. There was betrayal. There was finding your husband split open by the woman with whom he had been cheating on you, his chest a bloody space but his eyes still capable of seeing you, his lips still capable of uttering your name. Instead of saying any of that, she ordered a slice of the homemade apple pie, which was tart and cinnamony, and a cup of coffee that had been sitting in the pot too long. Once she was finished, she visited the restroom, left a generous tip on the table, paid at the register, and exited into the afternoon sunlight.

When she heard the girl's voice behind her calling, "Wait!" Lisa assumed it was because she had found the tip and thought the amount was a mistake.

She slowed to allow her to catch up, a reassuring platitude at her lips. Her right hand at her side, the girl half-ran the remaining distance to where Lisa had paused at the trunk of her car. Hoping the exchange wouldn't take too long, as her teeth were really starting to hurt, now, Lisa said, "What is it?"

Instead of answering with some variety of, "You left this on the table," the girl said, "Is your name Lisa? Lisa Martinez?" So surprised was she to hear herself addressed by the name she hadn't used for seven years that Lisa failed to register the girl's right hand swinging up from where she had it pressed against her leg. The snub-nosed revolver in her grip was the kind of weapon you might keep under the counter of a restaurant too remote to expect a swift police response to your silent alarm. Flashing in the sun, the end of its abbreviated barrel swung toward her.

Almost as shocking as the gun, as someone pointing a gun at her, someone preparing to shoot her, to kill her, was the speed of Lisa's response. Moving toward the would-be murderer and to the right, she stepped past the pistol, circling the girl's right arm with her left, trapping it against her and forcing it to remain straight. The girl's eyebrows lifted, her mouth opened. Before she could react, Lisa threw her right elbow into the side of the girl's head. It struck with a thud that jarred the two of them. The girl's eyes widened, lost their focus. All the strength left her body and she sagged against Lisa heavily, the gun falling from her fingers.

Lisa eased her to the ground and retrieved the pistol. It was heavier than she expected. She fumbled with the cylinder until it opened, then held the gun barrel-up to allow the bullets to fall pinging on the gravel. The weapon empty, she snapped it closed and hurled it as far into the overgrown field bordering the parking lot as her muscles would allow.

Almost the instant the revolver left her hand and went spinning through the air, she realized it still had her fingerprints on it. But it hadn't been fired, was unloaded, and she didn't have the time to search for it in order to wipe it clean. And she was more concerned about the girl, who was slumped on her left side. Lisa squatted beside her. The girl's expression was blank, stunned. "Lisa," she murmured, "Lisa Martinez."

"I don't want to know how you know Sefira," she said, checking the girl's pulse, which was strong, her pupils, neither of which was dilated, and

gingerly pressing the side of her skull, which elicited an “Ow!” from her but didn’t reveal any obvious fracture. “All right,” Lisa said. “Is your mom in the kitchen? Your dad?”

“Lisa,” the girl said, “Lisa Martinez.”

“Terrific,” Lisa said. Gripping her under the armpits, she raised her to sitting. “Ow,” the girl said. “Come on,” Lisa said, helping her to her feet.

“Lisa,” the girl said, “Lisa Martinez.”

“If you say so,” Lisa said. “I’m not so sure, myself.” The girl leaning into her, Lisa walked them to the restaurant’s front door and inside, where she deposited the girl on a plastic chair across from the register. She half-expected to find whoever was working the kitchen standing there, come in search of their hostess/server when they realized they hadn’t heard from her in a while, but the place was empty. “Hey!” Lisa shouted, “Hey you! Hey, come here!” From the other side of the kitchen door, she heard someone call, “Hello?” “Hey!” she shouted again, “Hey, come here!” and ducked out of the building.

Disturbed as she was to have had a gun aimed at her, Lisa was equally troubled by someone the girl’s age being involved with Sefira. Her own adolescence was fresh enough in her memory for her to know that, whatever they might tell their parents or guardians, most kids were sexually aware and interested far earlier than they let on, a knowledge and curiosity facilitated by the Internet, and given the opportunity to explore their interest with a willing partner, would do so. Sophomore year of high school, she had had a particularly intense make-out session with a cute junior she had noticed from a distance and with whom she found herself waiting for the late bus one afternoon. The situation had escalated quickly, the two of them progressing from kissing to sliding their hands under one another’s shirts regardless of the fact that they were sitting on the school’s front steps. (They had been wearing jackets, which afforded them a measure of concealment as she explored under his t-shirt and he popped the cups of her bra over her breasts.) The arrival of the late bus had startled them out of their activity, and although they took the same seat, their hearts pounding, their faces flushed, they had done no more than hold hands. Lisa had felt dizzy at how far she had been willing to go, and with what speed, with this

boy she found attractive but didn't know especially well. From the stunned look on his face, his thoughts seemed to be running on parallel tracks. She had been afraid he might spread news of their encounter to his friends, brag about having felt a cheerleader's tits, but to the best of her knowledge, he told no one. On several occasions afterwards, they waited for the late bus together, but nothing else happened.

The point was, it was naive to think a girl old enough to be working couldn't have sexual feelings and experiences. Yet there was a difference—a profound difference between fooling around with the cute person you had your eye on and… she didn't know what to call it. A relationship with someone like Sefira? Technically, she supposed the word was accurate, but if it was a relationship, then it was of the same nature as the one between the fish and the lamprey suctioned to its flanks, chewing a hole in it to suck out its organs. Except, in this case, the fish had invited the lamprey to attach to it. All right, there were problems with her comparison, but the underlying meaning it aimed at was intact: Sefira was a parasite, using the desires of her hosts to allow her to fasten to and feed off them, in some cases, quite literally. That she had exploited the loneliness Lisa had recognized (and sympathized with) in the girl struck her as especially vile.

There was something else, too, mixed in with her continuing shock at having been threatened with a gun and her deepening disgust with Sefira, a memory of something which occurred in the quarter-second it had taken her to close the gap between herself and the girl and trap her arm. Within that sliver of time, she had seen the girl shrouded in darkness, as if wound in a sheet of black muslin. The darkness had been shot through with tiny points of light, or so she thought (she was less certain of this detail). Already, though, the pain in her teeth had worsened to the point it was making her head hurt. Concentrating on anything other than the road in front of her was difficult to nearly impossible. Maybe she could ask Gary to ask Madame Sosostris about it? Possibly. It would mean discussing the assailants Sefira had left waiting for her, their efforts to kill or at least harm her, but perhaps it would be worth hearing Gary exclaim for her safety, once again express his regret at involving her in all this, in the interest of further insight into what she had become part of. How would she respond were Gary to tell her

to break off her pursuit, it was too dangerous, he would take the consequences heading his way? How would she respond were he not to?

Later that day, on the outskirts of Denver, came the conflagration that roared through her mouth, reshaping her teeth from the monument to her orthodontist's skills to a garden of yellowed fangs. All thought of anything else evaporated, burned away by the heat of the transformation that overtook her. Sitting in the enormous parking lot of the Wal-Mart to which she retreated to wait out the pain raging through her, Lisa was aware of how exposed she was, how vulnerable to yet another of Sefira's minions. Particularly if whoever it was held a firearm, it would be simple enough to approach the Honda, aim, and keep on squeezing the trigger until Lisa was a bloody mess. A similar feeling of vulnerability nagged at her as she drove across the Rockies the following afternoon. How difficult would it be for someone in Sefira's thrall to ram a car or truck into hers, shoving it through the safety barrier and down the mountain? If the low stone walls were sturdier than they looked, a simple head-on collision would serve the same purpose.

Yet she went unchallenged in the flat parking lot and in the high mountains. Not until she was gassing up the Accord at a rest area near Laramie did another of Sefira's puppets call her name. The confrontation was almost anticlimactic. Heavyset, wearing a white cowboy hat so large it might have been able to hold an actual ten gallons, jowls thick with stubble, the man was carrying a tire iron in his meaty right hand. As she was about to open her door, he walked toward her on cowboy boots whose worn heels made him rock from side to side. Huffing as he moved, he said, "Lisa?" Despite the gas station's brilliant lighting, the man appeared strangely dim—because, she realized, she was seeing him wound in the same glittering darkness which had wrapped the girl at the restaurant. "Lisa?" he said again.

"No," she said.

The man halted, confusion drawing his brows together. Lisa took advantage of the second this gained her to step in and bring her right fist up into his jaw. She was ready to follow with a straight left punch to his nose, but it wasn't necessary. His head wobbled, the tire iron clattered to the pavement, and the man sat down hard, his head forward. Lisa retreated to her car, slid

into it, and exited the gas station, leaving her would-be attacker where he was. The darkness around him was no longer visible; though why that was, she wasn't sure. Later, as she was checking into the Holiday Inn, she glanced at the knuckles on her right hand and noticed that she had scraped them. The young Asian woman who was taking her information saw the raw flesh and said, "Ouch. How'd you do that?" In reply, Lisa invented a story about changing a tire on the highway and her grip on the tire iron slipping, sending her hand ricocheting off the road. "You have to be careful," the clerk said. "That's so true," Lisa said.

Early the following morning, her pulse already quickened by the prospect of the coming confrontation with Sefira, Lisa registered that her knuckles were healed. She drove out of the hotel parking lot under a sky washed in the crimson bleeding from the horizon. *Red sky at morning* , she thought. The day's drive was uncomplicated, north up I-25 through east central Wyoming. Sefira, it appeared, had been eager to return home. Lisa kept the gearshift in fifth, the speedometer anywhere from ten to fifteen miles an hour above 70, sliding out, around, and back in front of the tractor trailers hauling freight. Overhead, the sun was a bright ball in a blue bowl of sky which somehow appeared several orders of magnitude larger. From the corner of her eye, she was aware of flat expanses of earth stretching to either side of the highway, of distant mountains high and sharp, a landscape straight out of the middle of a Hollywood western, when the heroes are on their way to meet their destiny, but she maintained her focus on the road ahead of her. At least her teeth no longer hurt, and she had adjusted to their new configuration far more quickly than she had imagined she would. On three separate occasions, Wyoming state troopers loomed in her rearview mirror, only to speed past her when she eased into the travel lane. Near Buffalo, 25 merged with I-90, which brought her across the Montana state line.

With Montana came the final darkening of her eyes, and the opening of the other dimension to her vision, which revealed the grassy land glowing as if lit from within. She wondered if the black shrouds she had perceived around her last two attackers were related to this, early manifestations of the incipient expansion of her perception. It seemed likely. Now that she was at most another forty-five minutes from Sefira, nervousness knotted her

stomach, diminished to almost nothing her appetite for the Big Mac and fries she ordered at the McDonald's off the second exit from 90. She forced herself to eat the meal and drink the large Coke that accompanied it. All the time, she was thinking about the butcher knife concealed under the Accord's spare tire, about the weight of it in her hand. She had assured Madame Sosostris—and Gary—she was up to the task of using the blade on Sefira; at the end of her conversation/confrontation with Sefira the other night, she had told herself she was going to drive it into her. Now, though, the prospect of actually stabbing her, of killing her, seemed as fantastical as any of the last nine days' events.

Gary's directions took her away from Wyola and its McDonald's, back under the interstate to the opposite side. After another five miles the road forked. She steered left and for the next half hour wound between low hills densely forested with Ponderosa pine and Douglas fir, until the terrain opened into a small, flat-bottomed valley. Ahead on the left, a rectangular sign atop a tall pole identified the Hide-Away Motel. *Holy shit* , Lisa thought, *this is it*. The sign was set at the roadside of a pocked and cratered parking lot, which spread in front of a long, single-story building punctuated at regular intervals by picture windows and doors. At the far end, the block of rooms connected to a box-like office. Parked before the office was a van whose aqua sides were painted with great, gaudy flowers, white daisies, pink carnations, yellow daffodils, all executed in a style that showed more enthusiasm than skill. *Sefira* , Lisa thought. *She's here. She's actually here*.

From the worn siding, the paint peeling from the doors, the dirt clouding the windows—not to mention the parking lot's lunar surface—it was clear no one had been renting rooms at the Hide-Away for years. Lisa braked and flipped on her turn signal, which was absurd. There was no one else on the road with her. That was habit for you. Looming behind the building was a dark mass she initially took for another of the surrounding hills, until she saw that, unlike those hills, which glowed with the same light her eyes had gained the ability to perceive, this one gave off no radiance. Despite the mid-afternoon sun, its features remained difficult to see clearly, its features obscure. The lopsided silhouette reminded her of the sand castles she and Janice used to build when they were kids on the family vacation to the

Jersey shore. They would gather handfuls of wet sand and allow it to drip through their hands onto the beach, forming layered, tapering structures, like a cross between anthills and beehives. (Somewhere in her memory, Gary cried about the hives, about not wanting to be taken into the hives.)

Navigating potholes large and larger, Lisa rolled across the parking lot to Sefira's van, stopping crossways behind it, blocking Sefira from leaving. She set the parking brake and killed the engine, cutting off Dolly in the midst of her latest round of pleading with Jolene. She reached for the lever to release the trunk and, heart thudding with such force she felt it in her wrists, exited the car. The air was warm, humid. Keeping the door to the motel office in view, she walked to the back of the Accord and raised the trunk. A thick coat of dirt caught the sunlight, turning the office windows into bright rectangles. The entire time listening for the creak of the door's hinges, she ducked under the trunk, hoisted the trunk board, and unscrewed the nut securing the spare, fingers slipping in her haste. The tire loose, she lifted it with her left hand and reached under with her right for the rolled-up towel. Without replacing the nut, she lowered the board and spread the towel on it.

Through the words and symbols scratched onto its almost comically oversized blade, her reflection regarded her from the polished metal's depths. With her sunglasses on and her mouth closed, you wouldn't guess she had been through any of the past days' trials. She removed the Ray-Bans, folded them, and set them on the towel. Her lips peeled back, she snarled at the black-eyed woman in the knife, who showed her a mouth full of yellowed fangs in return. *That's more like it*. She picked up the knife with her right hand and closed the trunk with her left.

The door to the office, she saw, was open, a figure moving out of it toward her.

8

There was a zip-up sweat jacket in the back seat of the Accord. Lisa ran out of the house to fetch it. "You need to cover up… that," she said to Gary, gesturing at his opened chest, which she was struggling not to look at, because every time her eyes slid over his torn flesh and broken bone, the

gory *space* in him, it was all she could do not to start screaming again. “I don’t suppose you know where your clothes are?”

“No,” Gary said. “I…” He glanced away and she realized that, amazingly, he was embarrassed.

“I think I have something in the car,” she said. As she turned to go, Gary caught her arm in his cold hand. “What is it?”

“Don’t leave me,” he said, his shame replaced by fear.

She tugged out of his grip. “I’ll be right back,” she said, and headed for the stairs.

Leaving him would be easy enough, Lisa thought as she reached into the car for the jacket. Just get behind the wheel, put the key in the ignition, and don’t look back. Where was he going to go in this condition? She could wait a day or two, then call the cops, tell them her husband hadn’t been home or in touch for forty-eight hours and she was worried about him. Her friends, she would say, had reported seeing him with another woman; although he had reassured her she was a client for his web design business. Sefira: she didn’t have the woman’s last name; her husband hadn’t mentioned it. The assumption would be that Gary had left her for this Sefira, run off with her to parts unknown. All she would have to do was forget about this house, 1430 Wycombe, and what she had found in it. Would that be so difficult? It required an enormous effort to accept the injury that had been done to Gary, although that dwindled in comparison to the Herculean effort necessary to deal with his continuing animation. (Was he alive? He was moving and speaking, which made the answer to the question seem to be yes; on the other hand, it simply wasn’t possible to survive that degree of trauma. How was she supposed to think of him, then? A word from childhood monster movies bobbed to the surface of her thoughts: *undead*.) Sweat jacket in hand, Lisa hesitated. If she returned to the house, if she drove Gary to whomever it was he wanted to talk to, she would be committing herself to something whose ending she could not begin to conceive. Yet she was kidding herself if she imagined she could leave this place and never think of it again. She would do nothing but think about it; she would obsess over it. Better to exert what control she could over the situation.

When Gary saw her, he said, “I wasn’t sure you were coming back.”

“That makes two of us,” Lisa said, holding out the jacket to him. “Do you need help with this?”

“I think I can manage,” he said, which was true, or true enough. Lisa tried not to listen to the cracks and pops his bones made while he tugged the garment up his arms and zipped it over his chest. Several sizes too small for him, the jacket hugged Gary’s torso, outlining the perimeter of his wound in baby blue fabric. At least the bloody cavity was hidden from view.
“Ready?” Lisa said.

“Yeah.”

This trip to the car took far longer. Gary walked slowly, hesitantly, as if concerned too sudden a motion might cause him to fall to pieces, literally. Lisa was reminded of some of her patients, adjusting to their bodies after a stroke or major injury, re-learning how to use it, how to be in it. (Was he serious about having been in Hell?) On the front step, Lisa pulled the door shut behind her and, on impulse, used the hem of her shirt to wipe her fingerprints from it. It occurred to her that she had opened several doors within the house, and if she was serious about removing evidence of her presence here, she should clean those doorknobs, too. “I’ll be right back,” she called to Gary, who was shuffling along the front walk.

As she rushed through dark halls, swiping the doorknobs with her shirt, she had a vision of emerging outside to find Gary collapsed, lifeless, a police car finally appearing to respond to the neighbors’ complaints of someone driving like a lunatic on their usually quiet street. No one would believe anything other than that she had learned her husband was cheating on her and brutally murdered him. Based on what the cops found when they explored the house, they would assume she had killed Gary here and was in the process of moving his body someplace to dispose of it. At the trial, her effort to wipe her fingerprints would be taken as an indication not only of her guilt, but of her culpability, a clear sign she understood what she was doing and was attempting to evade capture for it. Her martial arts training would be invoked to present her as someone strong enough and aggressive enough for violence. Given the political climate, the prosecution would no doubt present her as an angry Latina, out for hot-blooded vengeance. All of

which would be the final raised middle finger from a woman she had never met, but who seemed delighted to wreck her life.

So certain was Lisa of the scenario she had envisioned that, when she burst out the front door and found Gary still upright, standing next to the car, no police cruiser in sight, she almost lost her balance, made dizzy by the relief surging through her. For a second time, she shut the door and ran the bottom of her shirt over it. She hurried to the car, opening it and waiting while Gary lowered himself into the passenger's seat. He couldn't find the seatbelt. Impatient to leave, still half-expecting the cops to come rolling along the street, she yanked out the buckle and fastened him in, the hair on the back of her neck raising as she leaned close to his chest. "Thank you," he said, his voice somewhere to her right. She said, "You're welcome," the mutual courtesy ridiculous. In the depths of her mind, her father said, "There's always a place for good manners." *Even in a situation like this, Dad?*

She drove into Huguenot with the exaggerated care of someone who wasn't sure if she was all the way sober after a couple of drinks a couple of hours ago, keeping at or under the speed limit, watching for where it dropped from 55 to 40, then 40 to 30, a pair of changes the local cops exploited, signaling well in advance of her turns, coming to a full halt at the stop signs she encountered. All of which was potentially suspicious behavior at this time of night, but with any luck, a cop sitting at the side of the road would not deem it worth abandoning a hiding place for.

The sharp smell of blood hung in the car. The silence between her and Gary was great, made worse by the fact that, beneath the drone of the engine, she could not hear him breathing. *Of course not ,* she thought, which did not remedy things. She glanced at Gary, who was staring straight ahead, his face shining with the crimson tears sliding down his cheeks. "What is it?" she said.

"This," he said, raising his hand to take in the trees, the darkened houses they were passing. "It's all so beautiful. It's too much."

"What happened to you?" she said.

"Sefira," he said, his lip trembling. "She isn't… She did this to me with her bare hands. Except, they weren't hands, anymore." He wiped his tears with his (her) sleeve.

“What are you talking about?”

“Sefira. She isn’t human. She’s a monster.”

“Obviously.”

“No,” Gary said, his voice breaking. “I mean, an actual monster.”

“You were fucking a monster.”

“Yes. No. I mean, not when we were—she changed—”

“Forget it,” Lisa said.

After another minute not listening to Gary’s lungs not working, though, she said, “You were in Hell?”

He hesitated. “Yeah.”

“What…”

“What was it like?”

“Yes.”

“Dark,” Gary said. “The ground was rocky, sharp. Every time you moved, it cut you. There was fire everywhere, rivers and lakes of it, like magma. In places, fire shot up out of the rock in geysers. The air was full of heavy smoke. You wanted to cry, or scream, but if you made too much noise, you would attract the demons.”

“Demons?”

“Or devils. I heard them called both.” Gary paused. Fresh tears leaked from his eyes. “They were terrifying. No two were the same. They were… all twisted. Some were tall, skinny, with an extra arm or two. Others moved closer to the ground, like spiders. There were a few who lived in the fire, in the pools of lava. Their skin was charred, covered in shards of cracked and broken armor that had melted into it. A few were on fire, in part or in whole. Their faces… you didn’t want to be close enough to see their faces, because if you were, there was a good chance they were about to capture you, and once they had you, that was it. You were gone. But I saw one when I first arrived, and it was awful. Half its skull was caved in. The other half was taken up by this enormous round eye that had a half-dozen slivers of metal sticking out of it. Its mouth…” His voice trailed off.

Lisa turned left onto Old Soldier’s. “And you just—went there?”

“You’re asking me what it’s like to die.”

“I guess so, yeah.”

“Horrible. Sefira, she—what she did to me—it took a long time. I was conscious for all of it. Which I wouldn’t have thought possible.” He swallowed. “I would have assumed that, after a certain point, your system would give out. Shock would stop your heart. I was wrong. Sefira did something to me—she paralyzed me. And then she… opened me. The pain—I don’t know how to describe it. It went so far beyond anything I had ever felt before, I kept thinking, *This can’t be real, there’s no way this is real*. I want to say it was imaginary, which sounds like completely the wrong word, I know. But I was in a situation that could only have happened in my imagination, so the description kind of makes sense.”

At the intersection with Golding, Lisa took a right.

“I always hoped—when I thought about dying—about how I would want to die—” Gary stopped.

“It’s all right,” Lisa said. “If you don’t want to say any more, it’s fine.”

“I wanted to drift away,” Gary said. “Like going to sleep at the end of a long day, when you’re exhausted. As if sleep is a warm bed you’re slipping into. I figured that was the best way to go. If not gently, then fast, so fast you wouldn’t know what had happened to you. I dreaded suffering; although I was worried about cancer, not… evisceration.” He shook his head.

“Beside where she had positioned me in the basement, Sefira had a red and white cooler. Not full-sized, maybe the next step down. Large enough for a picnic lunch. There were bags of ice stacked next to it, seven or eight of them. After she finished breaking my ribs apart… after… she stood. She had been straddling me. She stepped over to the cooler and emptied half the bags into it. The ice made a shushing sound as it fell. I was breathing so fast I was hyperventilating, but I couldn’t pass out, which I was desperate to do. I could hear my heart beating. It sounded wet. I think I knew—I had put the pieces together, and I knew what was happening. I couldn’t believe it, but I knew. Sefira was—she had changed. Transformed. Her hands, her forearms had become… sharp. Her face… She dropped the empty bag she was holding and sat back down on me. She said something—it might’ve been,

‘Let’s see.’ I was trying to speak, to plead with her, but my jaw was paralyzed, too. All I was capable of were screams and moans. Sefira leaned forward and dug her right hand into me. I… The pain…” His tongue scraped across his lower lip. “It wasn’t just the pain, it was the sensation of her fingers pushing around inside my chest. She murmured to herself, ‘No, not this. Maybe this?’ as if she were a butcher and me the animal on the slab. Finally, she found what she was looking for. She twisted her hand, corkscrewing those sharp fingers. When she removed it from me, it was full of meat. She stretched her hand over the cooler and let the bloody pieces drop onto the ice. Before she returned to working on me, Sefira raised her fingers to her mouth and licked the blood from them. Then she resumed butchering me.”

The traffic light at the junction with Main Street was red. Lisa rolled to a stop, raising the turn signal for a right.

Gary said, “I was sure I was about to die. I couldn’t understand how I hadn’t already. I was certain I should have bled out. I wanted to die, more than I have ever wanted anything. The constant pain—the agony—I never appreciated how long the body can go on suffering, how, even when you’re in pain, there can be room for additional pain, different pain. It wasn’t just the physical agony: my mind felt as though it was on the verge of collapsing, my sanity disintegrating. I was desperate to escape the monster squatting on me, extracting my organs whole or in part and dumping them into her cooler.”

Green light filled the car. Lisa turned right, immediately flipping the signal down for the left across Main into the driveway of the purple farmhouse.

“When I realized Sefira was reaching for my heart,” Gary said, “I thought the end had finally arrived. I was almost relieved. But no. I watched her lift the heart from me, cradle it in her hands, and kiss it. I saw her place it in the cooler with exaggerated care, then stand so she could tear open the remaining bags of ice and pour them on top of what she had taken from me. She closed the lid, fastened it shut, and lifted the cooler. She carried it out of the basement—to her van, I assumed.”

There was a small parking lot behind the house, its sole occupant an older model blue Volvo. Lisa drove in beside it, pulled the parking brake, and

shut off the engine.

"Sefira came back once," Gary said, "to gather the empty bags and call you. She was—she had become human again. Though now that I had looked at her other face—her *true* face—it was impossible for me not to see it lying just beneath the surface of her features. I listened as she talked to you, taunted you. Strange as it sounds, I was waiting for her to say something to me, explain what had happened. You know, like the villain in a movie, revealing her evil plan. She didn't. She hung up on you and left the room without another word. I heard her exit the house, and after a minute, her car starting. I guess…"

"What?" Lisa pulled the key from the ignition and deposited it in her jeans pocket. Her phone was tilted in the cup holder; she removed it and slid it into her pocket.

"You asked me what dying was like, but what I've been describing isn't dying. Actually, while I was lying there, empty… I wondered if I hadn't died, already. Maybe you didn't go anywhere once your body ceased functioning; maybe you just… hung around. Except, I was still in pain—tremendous, unbearable pain—which seemed a pretty compelling argument for me remaining alive. I knew you were probably on your way, and the idea of you finding me like… this made the situation that much worse.

"I don't know how long it was, not very, but everything around me began to shimmer, the way a soap bubble does when it's on the verge of popping. *This is it* , I thought. The end had arrived. There was enough time for me to wonder if the torture Sefira had put me through was some kind of terminal hallucination—if Sefira had killed me immediately and what I had experienced had been a last fantasy my brain had conjured in its dying seconds—and then the room… burst.

"Darkness swallowed me. I thought, *So there's nothing, after all*. Which was a relief. I wouldn't have to face any kind of… anything. With the room, the pain went, too, which for a moment was paradise. I had avoided you showing up at the house, and that was a comfort, too." He stopped. "I know—that's a shitty thing to say."

Lisa did not reply.

“For a couple of minutes,” Gary said, “I did nothing but lie where I was, savoring the absence of pain. I realized I could move. I ran my hands over my chest and found it whole, healed. Without warning, I burst into tears, into heaving sobs that went on and on. I cried for all of it, for the huge fucking mess I had made of my life, your life, our life. My tears came to an end as I became aware of the surface I was lying on, which was rocky, sharp. I sat up. The blackness around me was not uniform. Somewhere ahead was a dim, orange glow. I stood. Already, I understood the nowhere I had assumed I was was somewhere. I decided to investigate the light in the distance. Reaching it was slow going. The rocks were hard to walk on, painful, and for most of the journey, the terrain I was crossing was difficult to see clearly. I had this sinking feeling, this dread in the pit of my stomach, that I knew exactly where I was. As I drew nearer to it, the orange glow became an orange line winding across the horizon. After more time—a lot more time, the line widened, growing to a stream, and eventually a river, a vast river of lava, flames flickering on its molten surface. There were figures moving along its shores. If I had any doubt remaining as to my location, it vanished when one of the figures stalked by me. I was on the demon’s blind side, which was the only way I escaped its notice.”

Gary fell silent long enough for Lisa to assume he was done talking. She unfastened her seatbelt and opened the door. Before she could step out of the car, however, Gary said, “I was there for a year, Lise. It—I can’t go back. I can’t.” She could hear his voice careening into hysteria. She released his seatbelt, which retracted into its slot, startling him out of his growing panic. “We’re here,” she said. “Let’s go see if your Madame Whatever is awake.”

After she helped Gary out of his seat, his chest popping, they walked to the house’s back door. Due to the lateness of the hour, Lisa pressed on and held the doorbell for five seconds. “What do we do if she doesn’t answer?” she said.

“She will,” Gary said. His voice seemed to be coming from a couple of feet to his left.

“Suppose she can’t help us,” Lisa said. “Where do we go?”

“There’s a guy who runs an antique shop near Albany,” Gary said. “He might be able to help. If not, there’s someone in… Gloucester, I think. In Massachusetts.”

“Albany? Gloucester?” Lisa had a sudden vision of the two of them on a road trip that never ended, roaming farther and farther afield, continually searching for but failing to find someone who could aid them. She went to push the doorbell a second time, but the light perched next to the doorframe came on.

The woman who opened the door was wearing a fuzzy brown bathrobe over pink pajamas, her long brown hair a frizzy mess. She was younger than Lisa had anticipated, within a few years either side of her and Gary. “Can I help you?” she said, the tone of her question a reminder of how Lisa and especially Gary, in his blood-stained boxers and undersized sweat jacket, must look to anyone who wasn’t party to their extended nightmare. “Hi,” Lisa said. “I’m sorry to disturb you, but we heard you could help us.”

“Help you?” the woman said. Her hand had stolen to the robe’s right pocket, where, Lisa guessed, was concealed some means of defending herself, pepper spray or a Taser, even a pistol, should whoever had roused her in the middle of the night prove a danger.

“With this,” Gary said, and drew down the jacket’s zipper.

Lisa looked away. The woman inhaled sharply, said, “Holy shit.” Her reaction was oddly reassuring, the mingled horror and wonder in her profanity an indication she found both Gary’s emptied chest and his continuing animation as awful and incredible as did Lisa.

“The woman who did this is named Sefira,” Gary said, leaving the jacket open. “Only, she’s not a woman. She’s not human. She looks like she is, but it’s a disguise. She murdered me, and I went to Hell. That was where I heard your name. A guy named Aubrey Byrne gave it to me.”

“Aubrey?” the woman said. “You spoke with Aubrey?”

“I did. He gave me a message for you, in case I ever escaped. Which he swore to me I wouldn’t, but here I am. He said to tell you it wasn’t your fault. You did everything you could for him. He chose the third path.”

“You should come in,” the woman said, removing her hand from whatever it had been clutching in her pocket. “If you would zip your jacket—”

“Of course,” Gary said.

A short hallway led past a half-open bathroom door to a snug kitchen at whose round table the woman gestured for Lisa and Gary to seat themselves. Overhead, a line of track-and-rail lights glowed white. The faint odor of green apple dish liquid hung in the air. The red and white checked tablecloth was spread with an assortment of papers, which the woman gathered into a heap and moved to the counter behind her. “Taxes,” she said. “Doing what I can to keep my receipts in order.”

“It’s a pain,” Gary said. “We have our own businesses, and when tax time rolls around, our accountant has her work cut out for her.”

Lisa caught herself nodding, and was startled at how quickly she had slipped from the stark madness of the current moment into a familiar routine, one in which Gary tried a little too hard to be friendly to a new acquaintance and she tried to reassure the person through her sympathetic expression that she knew her husband was overdoing things. She listened to the woman and Gary comparing their respective accountants, as if she and he were here for one of the psychic readings the sign on the front lawn promised. *What do you foresee for our marriage?* While she talked, the woman opened the cupboard above the counter and fetched a pair of short glasses, one of which she set before Lisa, the other at the spot she intended for herself. From the next cupboard over, she retrieved a mostly full bottle of Grey Goose, out of which she tipped a generous portion of silver liquid into Lisa’s glass, a more modest serving into hers. Lisa reached for the glass and drank half of it without tasting the vodka. The alcohol flared in her stomach, sending a wave of heat rolling over her. She finished the remainder of the drink and held out her empty glass for a refill, which the woman poured before setting the bottle on the table and taking her seat. Already, the vodka was sanding the rough edges off her emotions, easing the tension that seemed to have gripped every last one of her muscles. Lisa considered speeding the process along, swallowing the second drink and adding a third and fourth to it. How long had it been since she had gotten good and drunk, head-swimming, falling-down shit-faced? As a rule, she avoided such excess, a part of the healthy lifestyle she did her best to

maintain, but if ever there was a time for the rule to be excepted, surely, this was it.

Gary preempted any moves in that direction, however, by speaking. “Madame Sosostris—”

From the other pocket of her robe, Madame Sosostris produced a scrunchie, which she used to secure the mass of her hair into an approximate ponytail. “Tell me your names,” she said, lifting her drink.

“I’m Gary,” Gary said, “Gary Murray. This is my wife, Lisa.”

“Is that how you would describe yourself?” Madame Sosostris said, looking at Lisa over the rim of her glass.

“Right now, I don’t know how I would describe myself.”

“You weren’t aware of what your—what Gary was up to with this other woman.”

“She isn’t a woman,” Gary said.

“No,” Lisa said. “I mean, I heard from my friends that the two of them were hanging out, but when I asked him about her, he said she was his client.”

“Then I’m sorry,” Madame Sosostris said after tasting her drink. “Sometimes, in situations like this, both parties are full and willing participants. When one isn’t, it’s quite a shock to them.”

“Yeah,” Lisa said. “What do you mean, ‘situations like this’?”

“I’m assuming Gary was involved with an inhabitant of the pneumasphere—a demon.”

“A demon?” Lisa said.

“As a rule, demons appear to the people who summon them. The people who call them up tend to be after something: power, or money, or revenge—”

“Or sex,” Lisa said.

“—or sex,” Madame Sosostris said. She regarded Gary blankly. “Was that what it was? Sex?”

“Yes,” he said.

“Once the demon has provided whatever it was brought for, it extracts its price. Someone who knows their way around this kind of thing will have negotiated that detail beforehand. Someone who doesn’t…”

“Winds up like this,” Gary said.

Madame Sosostris nodded.

“You were…” The rest of the question died in Lisa’s mouth. Practicing sorcery? Raising a demon? Making a deal with it? She pictured Gary in black robes, standing in front of a pentagram chalked on the floor, a heavy book of spells open in his hands. Already, the situation had the feel of a horror movie, an extended blend of the supernatural and the gory, with plenty of sex thrown in; the image of Gary as a sinister magician threatened to tip the production into outright camp.

“I didn’t know I was summoning a demon,” Gary said, returning them to the realm of the horror movie. “I met Sefira online. It was on an adult website.”

“A hookup site,” Lisa said. The horror and awe twisting within her were joined by a third emotion: anger.

“Yes,” Gary said.

“The kind of place where most of the women are bots,” Lisa said, “or guys, getting off on pretending to be hot girls.”

“Or demons, apparently,” Gary said. “I messaged Sefira for a couple of weeks. She said she was on the road. She said she traveled a lot, for her work, and would be passing this way, if I wanted to meet. I did. And…”

“You fucked her,” Lisa said.

“Yes. Then she did this to me.” He nodded at his chest.

While they were talking, Madame Sosostris produced a deck of cards from Lisa didn’t notice where. Larger than ordinary playing cards, their backs were white, unadorned. She placed the deck on her left and used her right hand to slide the top four cards onto the tablecloth in a line. Her hand drifted over the blank rectangles, pausing at the cards at either end, before turning over the second card from the right. The picture on the other side was in a style that reminded Lisa of stained glass, heavy black frames surrounding luminous colors. It showed a field of tall grass interspersed by

an assortment of flowers. A bee hovered in the foreground, its course represented by a black line winding and looping from blossom to blossom. Madame Sosostris flipped the card to its left. Executed in the manner of a sketch done with colored pencils, this one featured a fiery rock crashing through a glass or crystal globe, shattering half of it. The decoration on the card at the left end appeared to be a photograph of an angular statue—based on the wear evident on its surface, an ancient one. Its subject was seated cross-legged, hands on knees, lap heaped with rounded objects, some of which had rolled onto the surrounding floor. Triangular shapes that reminded Lisa of shark's teeth ran up the statue's arms, while its head rose into a cone whose wavering lines suggested an elaborate arrangement of hair. The space its eyes and nose should have occupied was blank, its mouth weathered into a trio of vertical lines. A flat circle framed the figure's head. The rest of the piece had been carved from grainy, sand-colored rock, the disk was of black stone, its surface matte. Madame Sosostris lingered on the card, then revealed the last, which was empty, white as its other side. Lisa wondered if it was a mistake, if the woman would slip a replacement from the deck, but she left the white card where it was. She lifted her glass and drank from it. "She's a succubus," she said, "your demon."

"What does that mean?" Lisa said.

"It's a sex demon," Gary said.

"I think we knew that already."

"What's more," Madame Sosostris said, "she's one of the Shattered Company."

"I don't know what that is," Lisa said.

"It's a group of old powers. Very old—pre-human."

"I thought it all was pre-human," Gary said. "At least, that was what I learned in CCD. First there was God, and then He made the angels, and then some of them rebelled, and then they became the devils and demons. People don't enter the picture until after all that."

"The pneumasphere's a bit more complicated than that."

"That's the second time you've used that word," Lisa said, "pneumasphere. What is it?"

“The afterlife,” Madame Sosostris said, “although I prefer not to use that word. ‘Afterlife’ makes the place sound separate from us. It isn’t. It intersects this world in a multitude of ways. If it weren’t so New-Age-y, I’d say it’s the spirit world. Another dimension, or plane of existence. It has its own ecology, its flora and fauna, its inhabitants. This Sefira comes from an especially ancient chamber known as the Broken Land.”

“Chamber?” Lisa said.

“Do you know what a rhizome is?”

“A potato?”

“For example. Something with no central organization, just a collection of connected nodes.”

“All right.”

“This is how the pneumasphere is arranged. Each of its chambers is vast, a universe in and of itself. There are links among the various nodes and major events here. You mentioned Aubrey Byrne,” she said to Gary. “He and I thought it possible new chambers emerged in response to significant changes on this plane, to the ascent of new species to the top of our ecosystem. That’s the other thing about the pneumasphere: it’s reactive. Occurrences on Earth can effect conditions there. It takes something significant, something global, but a catastrophe for us has the potential to devastate the environment for them. This was the case with the Broken Land. There was a cataclysm—an asteroid struck the earth. The resulting firestorm killed off most life on the planet.”

“You’re talking about the dinosaurs, right?” Gary said, the eager student trying to impress the teacher.

Madame Sosostris shook her head. “Earlier. During the planet’s lifespan, there have been half a dozen of these extinction-level events. When one occurs, it disrupts the pneumasphere. In this instance, the chamber most dramatically affected was connected to what was then the dominant form of life, the insects.”

“Sefira’s an insect?” Lisa said.

“Approximately,” Madame Sosostris said. “She and her kind have the same relation to insects that an angel might have to a human.”

“Except, she’s not an angel,” Gary said.

“No,” Madame Sosostris said, “and yes. If you try to extend the comparison very far, it breaks down. I’d rather call her a power. When the asteroid smacks into the Earth, she and all the other inhabitants of her chamber are engulfed in fire. The air burns. The ground convulses, cracks. This goes on for—I should add, time doesn’t work the same way in the pneumasphere.”

“I can attest to that,” Gary said.

For the first time, Lisa thought, *Good*.

“What lasts for decades, centuries here continues for eons there,” Madame Sosostris said, “The inhabitants can’t die, not really, but they can suffer. And they do, they endure agonies that last an eternity. Slowly, they change—adapt to what their home has become. At some point, after a long, long time, a few of them rediscover the routes from their space to our world. You can appreciate, this place seems like heaven to them. Not many can make the crossing, which requires a good deal of energy, and none can stay very long, likewise. Once humanity appears on the scene, however, all kinds of possibilities start to open up. We’re the type of beings Sefira and her kind can make exchanges with, the kinds of transactions I mentioned previously. The principle purpose of those… trades is to permit members of the Shattered Company to prolong their stay here. The transactions tend to be pretty gruesome.”

“Yes,” Gary said.

“During the process, they hook your soul and fling it to their fellows in the Broken Land—as a kind of tithe, I think. I’m not sure if the creatures there draw nourishment from the souls who arrive there.”

“If they catch you,” Gary said, “they do.”

“So what is Sefira planning for… what she took from Gary?” Lisa said.

“That’s obvious,” Gary said. “She’s going to eat it. Or maybe she has already; I don’t know.”

“She hasn’t,” Madame Sosostris said. “If she had consumed your organs—your heart, really—you wouldn’t be here.”

“Why is she waiting?” Lisa said.

“For her feeding to have the optimum result, she has to do it in her nest.”

“Which is where, exactly?” Lisa said.

“I don’t know,” Madame Sosostris said.

“Well, that’s a bit of a problem,” Lisa said.

“What are we supposed to do?” Gary said.

“Let me tell you what I do know,” Madame Sosostris said. “Sefira is on her way home. Although by this point she has a head start of several hours, the route she is taking is not a straight line. It will be circuitous. This is part of her renewing her connection to this plane. Each day, she’ll stop to rest, which will keep her from getting too far ahead. Once she reaches her nest, she’ll remain there for a number of days—three, at least, possibly as long as a couple of weeks. At the end of that period, she will consume Gary’s flesh. His soul will return to the Broken Land, and his body will be hers to do with as she pleases.”

“Like a zombie?” Lisa said.

“Yes. The real question isn’t where Sefira is now, or what address she’s driving to: it’s the use you intend to make of the knowledge I’ve given you.”

“What use can we make of it?” Lisa said.

“We can stop her,” Gary said, his de-centered voice full of a determination Lisa wasn’t sure he felt. “We can go after her and take back what she stole from me.”

“Hunt down a demon—a succubus—who tore you open—who broke your bones with her bare hands and fight her: that’s your solution?” As far as options went, it was no more ridiculous than the situation it addressed, but the apparent ease with which Gary’s “we” committed her to it churned the anger already threatening to overwhelm her other emotions.

“I don’t know—I mean, you won all those trophies for karate.”

Lisa laughed without humor. “I’m going to defeat her with my roundhouse kick.” She turned to Madame Sosostris. “Could you help us?”

“I can assist you,” Madame Sosostris said. “I can provide information, and a certain amount of material support, but that’s all.”

“Could you put us in touch with someone who could handle Sefira?”

“There’s one man I’m aware of,” Madame Sosostris said. “He lives over in Highland. If you choose to seek his aid, you’d be as well leaving here, dropping Gary where you found him, returning to your house, and cutting your throat.”

“So we don’t have any options,” Lisa said.

“Any *other* options,” Gary said. “We find out where her nest is, drive there, and confront her.” To Madame Sosostris, he said, “Is there a way to track Sefira? Is that something you can assist us with?”

“Yes.”

“If we stay here, I’m headed back to Hell,” Gary said. “I have nothing to lose by trying. If you don’t want to be part of this,” he said to Lisa, “I get it. I fucked up; it’s on me to fix this.”

“You can’t,” Lisa said. “How far do you think you can travel in this condition? You could clean yourself up, put on some decent clothes, but all it’s going to take is for one person to catch a glimpse of what’s under your shirt, and things go to shit. Even if you succeed in finding her nest, how are you supposed to fight a demon in this state? I hear what you’re saying about not having any other options. It’s just, I don’t think this is one, either.”

Madame Sosostris lifted the tarot card farthest to the left and returned it to the deck face-down. “What are you saying?” Lisa asked. Although she kept her eyes on the middle two cards, which she picked up and placed on the deck, Lisa had the sense the woman was utterly focused on her. She said, “Are you sure there’s no one else we can turn to?”

“If there were, I would tell you.”

Lisa hesitated. “Then it has to be me, doesn’t it?”

“Does it?” Madame Sosostris asked. She left the blank card on the table.

“Lise—” Gary said.

“Which fucking sucks,” Lisa said. Anger—rage as hot as any fire Gary had known in Hell incinerated her horror, her wonder, the surprising amount of pity she had felt for him. “You fuck up—Jesus, ‘fuck up’ doesn’t begin to cover it—you wreck it all, our marriage, everything we worked so hard to build—you tear it down in an instant, all so you can fuck some other

woman—*who isn't even a Goddamned woman*—and I have to clean up the fucking mess. I wish I could leave, drive away and let you deal with the disaster you've made. You're going to Hell? Oh well, actions have consequences, don't they?" Hand trembling with fury, she grabbed the glass of vodka and drank it. Fresh warmth bloomed in her stomach. Rather than dulling her anger, the alcohol stoked it.

"Lise," Gary said, "honey—"

"Shut up," Lisa said. "Let's fast-forward. Say I find Sefira, kick her ass, and recover Gary's… organs. What's next? Can you put him back together again, or is this a case of Humpty-Dumpty?"

"I don't know," Madame Sosostris said. "In these kinds of situations, destroying the demon may lead to the undoing of any magics it's performed."

"'May?' That's the best you can do?"

"At the moment, yes. But I'll research the matter."

"While I'm on the road, what happens to you?" Lisa said to Gary.

"I'll stay at the house."

"No," Lisa said. "You do not step foot in there. Never again."

"Where am I supposed to go?"

"He can stay here," Madame Sosostris said. "This house has a furnished basement. It's comfortable."

"What happens if I fail and he goes full Walking Dead?"

"I can handle that."

"Lisa," Gary said.

"I'm doing this because I am not a fucking monster," Lisa said. Set loose by the alcohol, her anger shaped the words that came next. "And because I don't have any other options, not really. I gave them up the instant I decided I was going to take Sefira's bait and drive to the address she gave me." It was true: the same calculus that had caused her not to abandon Gary at the house on Wycombe Street bound her in its equation. "You've already been seen around town with Sefira. Most of my friends called to report the two of you together to me. I have no doubt they've discussed it with one another.

Why wouldn't they? As far as gossip goes, it's pretty juicy. 'Lisa's perfect husband is fooling around on her.' Yeah, I could say you disappeared with the woman, but then I still have to wait seven years to have you declared legally dead. If I want to hurry matters along, let you turn into a zombie, do whatever's necessary to put you down, and arrange for the authorities to find the corpse, that won't be any easier. They'll assume you were murdered, which I suppose will be close enough to the truth. Who do you think is going to be the number one suspect in the investigation into the death of her cheating husband? It doesn't matter that I'm innocent. It could take years for a trial to prove that. I still lose a portion of my life—not to mention, there's the possibility I could be found guilty, and I am not taking that chance. I don't feel like sacrificing any more, thanks.

"Here's what I intend to do. I will follow Sefira to this nest, I will send her skank ass back to insect hell, and I will hope that restores you. Prior to my departure, you are going to sign a simple divorce form giving me everything. Upon my return, we will take that form to a lawyer and I will not see you again. You will leave town and you will not return. You will make no effort to contact me. If anyone asks, I'll tell them you cheated on me with a woman you met online and that was that.

"I'm not going to ask if any of this is agreeable to you, because it's agreeable to me. Do you understand?"

"Yes," Gary said.

"All right," Lisa said. "How do we find out where Sefira is headed?"

Madame Sosostris pushed the empty card before her across the tablecloth to Gary. "Turn this over," she said.

He did. Done in heavy pen strokes and watercolors, the picture on the other side was of a fifties-era motel next to a wide stream and in front of low hills. Arcing across the top of the image, large yellow letters outlined in black invited whoever regarded the picture to ENJOY BEAUTIFUL MONTANA at the HIDE-AWAY MOTEL.

"Montana," Lisa said. It was farther than she'd anticipated, but at most forty-eight to seventy-two hours with the gas pedal to the floor. As if reading her thoughts, Madame Sosostris said, "It's going to be slightly more involved than hopping on I-90 and heading west."

“Of course it fucking is,” Lisa said.

“I told you Sefira is taking the long way home. It’s part of the process that began when she removed Gary’s heart, and will conclude once she consumes it. In some ways, the route she’s driving is the most important part of the ritual. As she goes, she’s marking a pattern in space and time. In order for what you’re planning to have the best chance of success, you have to follow the same design. Because of your connection to Gary, you’re already a part of this larger process. Tracing Sefira’s path will move you closer to its center, which should help your odds.”

“How am I supposed to know which way she’s going?”

“You have a smartphone?”

“Yes.” Lisa withdrew it from her jeans.

“Place it on the table next to Gary.” Lisa did. “Put your left hand on it,” Madame Sosostris said to Gary. At the touch of his flesh, the phone chimed and its screen glowed. Startled, Gary pulled his hand away. To Lisa, Madame Sosostris said, “You can take it.”

The phone’s Google Maps App had been activated, a course plotted north from Huguenot past Albany, into the Adirondacks, then west via a series of local roads to Watertown. “That’s convenient,” Lisa said. She saved the information. “How about when Gary isn’t around?”

“I’ll ensure you receive updated directions.”

“It occurs to me I should be asking you what this is going to cost us—me,” Lisa said.

“What do you think is a fair price?”

“I’m no good at bargaining. I’ll give you half of whatever I get from Gary. I’m not sure exactly how much that is. If I decide to sell the house, you could do all right.”

Gary opened his mouth, shut it without saying anything.

“Of course,” Lisa said, “if I fail, you get nothing. Maybe you’d rather have a check up front.”

“I believe I’ll wait,” Madame Sosostris said. “While he’s here, perhaps Gary can answer some questions I have about the Broken Lands. That kind

of information is difficult to come by. It can serve as a down-payment."

"I'll tell you whatever I can," Gary said.

"There's one more thing you need," Madame Sosostris said, rising from her chair. She exited the kitchen through a door that led toward the front of the house.

"You're serious about—everything you said," Gary said.

"Yeah," Lisa said, "all of it." Anger sealed the plan she hadn't been fully aware of until she was speaking it.

"I'm not sure what to say."

"Try not saying anything."

Madame Sosostris returned carrying a large knife, which she set on the table. It was a butcher knife, of the type that came as part of a set of kitchen knives. The black plastic handle had been wrapped in rubber bands. The broad blade was covered in writing, incised with words and symbols. Some of them, Lisa knew: *Yahweh*, *Jehovah*, *Dios*, *Dieu*, *Deus*, *Gott*. Others were in characters she recognized but could not read: Greek, Cyrillic, Arabic, Korean, Japanese, Chinese. There was one in what she was pretty sure were Norse runes, another whose letters each resembled a small square drawing, which she thought was Mayan, and several more she couldn't place. Madame Sosostris crossed her arms and said, "I told you that the pneumasphere is reactive. To a certain extent, the same thing is true of its inhabitants. They're susceptible to our beliefs, particularly those strongly held. Every name on this blade was inscribed by someone for whom it's sacred. That should make it more effective against a demon."

"Like a +3 dagger," Gary said. "In *Dungeons & Dragons*."

Lisa picked up the knife. It was solid, heavier than she expected. "Why the rubber bands?"

"For the grip," Madame Sosostris said.

"In case it gets bloody," Gary said.

"Until you arrive at Sefira's nest, I'd recommend keeping the knife hidden," Madame Sosostris said.

"Maybe in the glove compartment," Gary said.

Lisa shook her head. “In the trunk. I’ll wrap it in a towel and put in under the spare.”

“Whatever you think best,” Madame Sosostris said.

“I assume I’m going to do more than threaten Sefira with this.”

“You have to stab her in the heart with it.”

Nodding, Lisa said, “Anything else?”

“Not really,” Madame Sosostris said. “You must adhere to the path she is making. I know it’s tempting to head directly to her nest, lie in wait for her, and were circumstances different, that might be the only option. It’s not, though, so take advantage of the chance to improve your position.”

“All right,” Lisa said, “I will. What if I catch her before then?”

“You won’t,” Madame Sosostris said. “She has a head start, and you still have to go home and pack a bag. If you could close your eyes for a couple of hours, that would be good, too.”

“Suppose something happens and I do end up at the same rest stop as Sefira, though? I don’t want to miss her.”

Madame Sosostris frowned. “Check your phone’s pictures.”

At the head of her photos, there was a new image. It showed an older minivan, of the rounded design that reminded Lisa of a giant jelly-bean. The vehicle was aqua, its sides pained with huge flowers. “Huh,” Lisa said. “I thought she would be driving something less… tacky. Shouldn’t be too hard to spot.” She pocketed the phone. “If you don’t have any more information for me, then I’m just about ready to leave.”

“I can’t think of anything else. I wish I knew more.”

“Lise,” Gary said.

“What?”

“I’m sorry. And thank you.” He smiled weakly.

“Do you have a computer?” Lisa said to Madame Sosostris, “With a printer?”

“Yes. Why?”

“Before I go, I want to print a divorce form and have the two of us sign it. If you could keep it somewhere safe until I get back, I’d be grateful.”

“Of course.”

Amazing, Lisa thought as she wrote *Lisa Murray* on the line designated for the plaintiff, how so simple an act as signing your name could have such momentous consequences. All of the planning that had gone into their wedding, the dramas large and small they’d been through in the years since, from buying their house to Gary stepping on a rusty nail and requiring a tetanus shot last summer, from taking ballroom dancing lessons at the dance studio in Wiltwyck to binge-watching all the *Harry Potter* movies one long weekend—all undone in the length of time it took for the pen Madame Sosostris had given her to finish its course across the paper. It seemed as remarkable as anything else she had been part of the past few hours. She half-expected Gary to refuse to add his name to the document, to plead with her to forgive him, grant him a second chance, but he took the pen from her and signed the form without comment. She wanted to say something, to deliver a remark fitting to the sudden and disastrous end of their marriage, but could think of none. Sadness bitter as lemon rind mixed with her anger, soured it, and she left soon thereafter.

9

And here she was, eight days and thirty-three hundred miles later, in the parking lot of a motel in Montana, watching first one man, then another, and then a third emerge through the door to the Hide-Away’s office. Each was enveloped in the same cloud of shining darkness Lisa had glimpsed around her last two attackers, now clearly visible. The first man was shirtless, his gut an empty cavity, dried and darkened blood in patches and streaks on his tan slacks and spotted on his brown loafers. Although his eyes were unfocused, his skin gray, he moved toward Lisa with the confident stride of a veteran salesman approaching a new customer. The man behind him appeared younger, his long hair floating around his head, the tatters of his black Slayer concert t-shirt embedded in the hole punched in the center of his chest. He held a long-handled ax in both hands, advancing with it held high and to the left, the position of a batter waiting

for a pitch. From the look of him, the third man had been dead a long time. His skin had withered, shrunk to his bones; his eyes were sunken, his lips drawn back from his yellowed teeth. His left arm appeared to have been tied to his shoulder with several loops of rusted barbed wire. Except for a belt hanging from his desiccated hips, he was naked, the space between his legs a ragged wound. He staggered more than walked, as if his joints had lost the trick of moving.

Here was Gary's fate, should she fail, illustrated. Horror churned her stomach, brought her Big Mac and fries to the top of her throat. Fighting the urge to run, to leap into her car and burn rubber out of there, she swallowed, inhaled deeply. The first man was circling to her left, the second to the right. The third was trailing behind the first. Their feet scraped on the pavement. She should have asked Madame Sosostris what the precise method was for dealing with the husk of one of Sefira's victims. Was it a case of destroying the brain? Wasn't that zombie-killing 101? Were these men covered by those rules? The question was academic: she wasn't in possession of a handgun, and she didn't like her chances of driving the butcher knife through each of their skulls. She slipped the weapon into the back of her jeans as the first man reached her, his hands out in a flurry of sloppy punches.

She ducked them easily. She could hear the shadow wrapping him, a metallic, shimmering sound like the song of a cicada, which she had the sense was being produced by the points of brightness floating within the darkness. *Swarm* , she thought, but had no idea what the word signified.

There was no time to dwell on it. From the corner of her eye, she saw the second man almost to her, the blade of his ax shining in the afternoon sun. She stepped in close to the first man and hammer-fisted his right collar bone twice. The second strike broke bone with a sharp crack, and the man's right arm dropped to his side. His left fist grazed the side of her head. Before he could swing it back towards her, she moved with unexpected speed, catching his arm at the wrist and elbow and twisting to her left. As far as take-downs went, it wasn't the most graceful, but it did the trick. The man lost his balance and toppled, his skull rebounding from the pavement with a *crack*. She pivoted into a retreat from the second man, who had broken into a slow run that culminated in a clumsy swing of the ax, which missed Lisa

and struck the driver's window of the Accord, caving it in. *My car!* While he was attempting to withdraw the ax from the car, she lunged forward and grabbed the handle with both hands. The same clashing song surrounded him. The man tried to yank the weapon from her grip; rather than fighting it, she went with his pull, unbalancing him into the Honda. He thudded against it, the impact loosening his grasp on the ax. She tore it from his fingers and snapped the end of the handle into the side of his face, crushing his cheek.

A hand seized her ankle: the first man, who had turned onto his ruined abdomen to grab at her. She swept the blade of the ax down and struck his forearm. The edge took a generous bite of the limb, the handle shuddering as it met bone. Lisa tugged her foot free of the man's hold, but the ax proved more difficult to remove. It had lodged in his arm, and as she attempted to work it loose, the second man caught her in a tackle, wrenching her hands from the handle and carrying her to the ground.

She landed on her side, and though she kept her head from striking the pavement, the impact knocked the wind from her. The second man was clambering on top of her, his cold hands clutching at her throat. She drove her elbow into his damaged face one, two, three times, then lifted her hips, dumping him off her. Although his features were a jumble worthy of Picasso, he continued to reach for her. She scrambled away and to her feet.

A glance in his direction showed the third man maintaining his slow advance, but still a safe distance from her. The second man was pushing himself up on his hands and knees. Using his one functioning arm, the first man struggled to do the same thing, but his injured forearm would not support his weight and the bones snapped, spilling him onto his face. Freed of its bony trap, the ax clattered on the ground. Lisa ran at the second man and kicked his head as hard as she could, as if it were a soccer ball and she intent on sending it to the opposite end of the field. With a crunch she felt through her sneaker, the man's head leapt up and back on his neck, farther than anatomy intended. Lisa went around him to where the first man, still struggling to his feet, had dragged himself backward onto his knees. She leaned down, grabbed the ax, and swung it, smashing the blunt side of the head into his skull, the force of the blow knocking him over.

Turning, she saw the second man, his head hanging at an angle which would not have been survivable had he been alive, renew his effort to stand. She looked at the first man. Despite the considerable depression in his head, he had not stopped moving, either. *So much for zombie-killing 101* , she thought. The third man's shuffles had brought him almost to her. He grasped his left wrist with his right hand and pulled, tearing the arm and its barbed-wire ligament from his shoulder. Swaying as he approached, he brandished the limb at her, a grotesque parody of an old man shaking his cane at the kids on his lawn.

"Oh come on," Lisa said.

The third man whipped his arm like a flail. A step back took her out of its range. Darting in and to the right, she struck his left hip with the ax. The joint splintered, the leg tilting into the pelvis, and with a lurch, the third man fell, still waving his arm as he went. Behind her, she heard sneakers scrape the pavement. His head lolling, the second man had risen to his feet. She smashed his left knee with the blunt side of the ax head, returning him to the ground. She might not be able to kill these men outright, but she could render them incapable of endangering her. She walked to where the first man lay writhing like an enormous grub and hammered his left leg with the ax until the knee popped. Leaving her opponents twisting on the parking lot, she headed for the door to the motel's office, ax in hand.

Her heart was pounding, adrenaline racing through her in a flaming rush. Looming behind the motel, the lopsided hill appeared more distinct, its bare surface the texture of dried mud, perforated at random intervals by oblong holes. This was her destination, she assumed. The question was, how was she supposed to access it?

The interior of the Hide-Away's office was dim, the ceiling low, the air still swirling with the dust stirred by the three men exiting. From the look of things, the trio had been here for some time, two of them seated in the wooden chairs backed to the front window, the other leaning with his back to them on the counter which bisected the room. To the right on the countertop, a green ceramic flowerpot held the remains of a plant dried to an anonymous stalk. On the wall opposite her, next to an open doorway, the hands of a lacquered wooden clock in the shape of Montana held at two forty-three. A saloon-style door hanging on the counter's left, whose hinges

screamed their protest at being used, admitted passage behind the barrier, where faded pamphlets advertising the wonders of Montana lay sprayed across the floor. Ready for a fourth assailant concealed next to the doorway, Lisa ducked her head into the room beyond.

It was empty. She entered what must have been the living quarters for whoever was working the counter. A single bed whose sheetless mattress bore a large, dark stain had been pushed against the wall to the right. At the foot of the bed, an end table supported a modest TV whose glass eye was fuzzed with dust. An open, empty mini-fridge held a hotplate and a coffee maker with a cracked carafe. Facing the fridge was a low bookcase stacked with Reader's Digest volumes. To her left, a door set in the wall stood ajar. Lisa walked to it, peered through the gap, and saw a motel room. She nudged the door wider with her foot. The doorway connected the front office to the adjacent motel room, as the door open across that space led to the room beyond, and the door she could see in its far wall linked to the third room, and so on, all the way to the last room, transforming the Hide-Away into a single space with a dozen chambers. With a look back to check that no one was approaching behind her, she crossed the threshold.

The first room's heavy yellow curtains were drawn, glowing gold with the afternoon sun, as were the curtains in each room she walked into. The rooms were arranged in the same fashion, a pair of double beds or a single queen-size positioned parallel to the front door, a dresser mounted with a big TV across from them, the bathroom door, the walls, carpet, and bedspreads in earth tones. Every last bed was unmade, the rumpled sheets strewn with articles of clothing: blouses, men's dress shirts, t-shirts that might have been worn by anyone; skirts long and short, slacks, trousers, jeans; formal dresses and three piece suits; panties and bras plain and fancy; boxers and briefs; stockings, knee-highs, dress and athletic socks. The floors around the beds were littered with footwear, high heels, flats, sandals, men's dress shoes, loafers, boots, sneakers. The styles were those of the last several decades, wide collars and bell bottoms tangled with shoulder pads and skinny jeans, ankle-length skirts wrapped around parachute pants. It was as if she were watching whoever had worn the clothes engaged in activities erotic and obscene, as if the motel had been the site of a decades-long orgy, a carnival of the flesh presided over by Sefira. At the bottom

limit of her hearing, Lisa fancied she could hear the mingled gasps and groans, the cries and calls, of the people who had embraced on top of their discarded clothing. The ghosts of perfumes and colognes, Chanel No. 5, Shalimar, Opium, and Axe body spray mixed with stale sweat and another, spoiled meat odor, which made her nose wrinkle and which grew stronger as she advanced through the motel. By the time she reached the fifth room, her eyes were watering. In the sixth room, Lisa had to breathe through her mouth, and that was barely enough to keep her from retching at the smell of decay clouding the air. As with the house on Wycombe, so strong was the stench that she was certain she should have been seeing the sheets and clothes stiff with blood, the beds and carpets spread with rotting viscera. Even with the extra dimension open to her sight, though, there was nothing visible beyond what lay in front of her. Her pulse had subsided from the height to which it had climbed during her confrontation in the Hide-Away's parking lot, the aggression that had powered her replaced by unease bordering on dread.

Beside the bathroom door in the sixth room, a jagged hole had been torn in the wall, as if someone had taken a sledgehammer to it. Tall and wide enough to allow a big man entry, it opened into a dim space, like a cave. Shifting the ax in her hands, Lisa approached the improvised doorway. Its dimensions not much larger than the entrance to it, the chamber extended back toward the lopsided hill (*Sefira's nest*) an indefinite distance, its shadowy length lit by the naked bulbs of electric lamps hung on its sides every fifteen to twenty feet. Careful to avoid the edges of the hole, some of which appeared sharp enough to draw blood, she stepped out of the motel room and into the passageway. While its floor was smooth underfoot—earth trod flat—its walls were a collage of wooden boards, tree limbs, and sundry other objects: a wooden sign from which the paint had worn off, a piece of a door, a shutter, nailed and plastered together. At least the spoiled meat smell was not as bad, here.

As she proceeded, though, she was aware of faint sounds audible through the walls, a steady rustling, as if the layered wreckage were crawling with insects, home to a vast colony of termites or wasps, audience to the last stage of her quest.

Ahead, the passage widened, the floor cut by long, deep trenches to either side. Each channel was heaped with debris, rounded objects the size of her hand whose surfaces shone black and green. Too flat to be spheres, they were decorated on one side by raised lines, on the other by elaborate designs which suggested faces caught in extremes of pain—or pleasure, she supposed. As she passed between them, the things shifted, as if something underneath them was moving, roused by her presence. They rang against one another, filling the passage with a tinny, off-key chorus, which gained in volume as Lisa hastened to the other side of the trenches. Once past them, she turned, watching their contents wobble and rock. Each channel, she assumed, held another of Sefira's husks, concealed under the saucer-sized objects. The question was, did she wait until they emerged from their hiding places and deal with them, or did she run, hope she could leave them behind? Phrased this way, it wasn't difficult to answer. Better not to have anything sneaking up on her.

One of the rounded things rolled onto the passage floor. Two from the opposite trench joined it, then another handful from both sides. Where they came to a halt, the black and green objects see-sawed, their motion increasing rather than diminishing. The raised lines curled against their undersides lifted, spread, and Lisa saw that they were legs, eight segmented limbs, and a single sharp proboscis. Those of the things on their backs flipped onto their bellies and began crawling across the dirt. Lisa was reminded of ticks, grown obscenely large. The faces inscribed on them shifted, their features twisting from agony to agony. She retreated a step, the hairs on the back of her neck, her arms, raising. Legs chiming, a tick crept toward her. Pulse pounding at the base of her throat, she continued backing up the tunnel.

When the first tick drew too close, she struck it with the ax. The blow cut the creature in half, its body crumpling as if made of foil. Greenish gas vented from the wound, along with a woman's scream—which, Lisa understood, was the same as the swirling cloud (though how she knew, she couldn't say). There was no time to dwell on the matter; the remaining ticks were hastening toward her. She split the next, heel-stomped the third, releasing more of the green shrieking. Ticks scurried around her. She chopped at another, severing one set of limbs. Something tickled her left

ankle: a tick raised on its back legs, attempting to scale her jeans. She kicked and flung it into the wall, where it was speared by a wood splinter. Two more ticks grabbed at her right leg. She swept them onto their backs with the ax, then burst them under her sneaker. Screaming clouded the air, vibrated the passage. Lisa hacked at a tick, missed. A tick lunged at her, driving its proboscis through her jeans, into her left calf. Pain flared in her leg, the white hot intensity of it dropping her to her knees. She smashed the tick with the ax handle, its snout pulling loose as its body caved in. Taking advantage of her lowered position, one of the surviving ticks stabbed her right thigh. Lisa shouted, her voice lost in the shrieking green. She released the ax, hammering the tick with her fist, the blow tearing it from her leg and crushing it. Green vapor writhed around her knuckles. There was one tick left. It went to spear her hand, but foundered on the remains of a comrade. Lisa drew her arm away, caught hold of the ax, and added its screams to the rest. The wounds in her legs burning, she stood, prepared for the ticks still shifting in the trenches to come streaming out at her.

For the moment, however, none did. Despite the blood dampening her jeans, a thrill of triumph swept her as she surveyed the broken and crushed forms of her attackers. She was tempted to carry the fight to the rest of the ticks, to leap in amongst their surprisingly fragile bodies and trample them. Instead, she resumed her trek along the passageway, albeit with frequent glances over her shoulders. Were it not for the shrieking, which had yet to subside, and which would conceal the ring of their approach, she would not have been concerned. The ticks were ineffectual as guards. She had been in more jeopardy from the trio of husks in the parking lot.

Around her, the tunnel went from wood patched with plaster to plaster smeared and layered on bare rock. Cemented into the walls in a seemingly random arrangement, human skulls with varying degrees of flesh and hair hanging from them stared open-jawed at her. In the jaundiced glow of the lamp hung amidst them, the skulls appeared to shift expressions as Lisa walked past them, shock and horror bleeding into outrage and anger, which in turn slid toward malevolent humor. The continuing screams, she could almost fancy, were pouring out of their bony mouths. Although the blood seemed to be flowing more slowly from her calf and thigh, the injuries throbbed, keeping weird time with the shrieking, in whose hoarse depths

she thought she could discern a rhythm, an ebb and flow of agony. She was suddenly warmer than she had ever been before, sweat rushing from her pores, saturating her shirt and jeans. As quickly, she was freezing, shivering with such ferocity, she dropped the ax, stumbling on and half-tripping over it. *The ticks* , she thought. *Infection*.

The screaming was louder, or her ears more sensitive, or both. Easier to hear, the rhythm wrapped in it approached familiarity, sense, until she recognized in its rises and falls words, sentences, rendered nigh-indecipherable by being shrieked. Having realized this, she further understood that she was hearing sentences on top of sentences, sentences layered on and braided around one another, six, eight, ten of them. As many as there had been ticks—which weren't ticks at all, but soul cages. Two of the tortured chains of words were almost decipherable; if she concentrated, she could just about make them out—

—she lay naked and spread-eagled on a queen-size bed in one of the Hide-Away's rooms, unable to move beyond the trembling that shook her as a grotesquely thin woman straddled her, drawing bloody loops of intestine out of the gaping wound below Lisa's navel and heaping them on the mattress. In the background, the room's TV was on and the theme from Hogan's Heroes *was playing—*

—she lay naked on the carpet at the foot of a double bed in another of the hotel's rooms, paralyzed, her arms at her sides, her legs together, while the same rail-thin woman knelt at her side, her hair tickling Lisa's chin and shoulders as she bent her head to Lisa's neck, which she was chewing through. Lisa could hear the breath whistling out of the hole the woman had bitten in her windpipe, could feel blood trickling into her lungs, filling them, suffocating her. In the distance, a motorcycle rumbled past the motel—

—she lay dead on the bed—

—she lay dead on the carpet—

—her heart had tightened, knotted, stopped—

—but she was still aware, still in pain, her nerves a net of fire, binding her consciousness to her—

—the agony threaded with other emotions, regret deep enough that all the tears in the world would never fill it, fear so profound it was worse than the

pain, it made her want to hide the way she had hidden from the dark as a child—

—she was running down a rocky hillside, its surface slicing the soles of her feet, the sky low black clouds reflecting an orange glow. She was trying not to lose her balance, not to fall, because they were right behind her, they were so close—

—she was screaming, pleading for mercy, as several sets of thin arms pushed her head-first into a narrow tube in a rock wall, within which a blindingly white flame roared—

—her blood boiled—her brains steamed in her skull—

—she was inside an impossibly small space, bound within a prison whose surface admitted no communication with any of the others she could see in similar chambers, confined with the hurt whose memory was identical with its occasion, with the remorse and dread and rage that amplified her suffering, a black cocktail which might be less bitter if she could share its taste with someone else, could force it into them—

Lisa vomited, doubling over, her stomach's convulsion squeezing a flood of tears from her eyes. Directly in front of her, a little more than an arm's length distant, a figure halted its approach toward her. Vision wavering with her tears, Lisa had the impression of a person horribly thin, wearing a tall hat or a crown, their arms hung with bracelets studded with spikes and blades. Wiping her eyes, Lisa retreated. Arms out to either side, long fingers spread, the figure advanced. Lisa spat. Already, she had identified the spindled form as the one she had seen in the memories the soul cages had driven into her, which meant that this was Sefira, she had finally found her.

She was horrifying. Beyond skeletal, she moved with the strange, mechanical grace of an insect, a mantis grown hideously large. (Which one of her friends had called Sefira a stick insect? Whoever it was, the description was truer than they had known.) Fungous-white, Sefira's flesh was embedded with a mosaic of what appeared to be cracked and broken glass, which winked and flashed in the corridor's light, as if she had been coated in the stuff and then it had shattered. Her skull rose in a corona of glass and bone. Her face was an approximation of the human, the dark eyes large, the nose a pair of slots, the mouth lined with bone and glass needles.

Sefira's eyes glittered, and Lisa saw that they were dusted with particles of glass. Malice animated her features, the expression of a predator stalking prey whose death would satisfy urges beyond hunger. She brought her hands up in a guard, displaying the glass shards protruding from her forearms, making of each a serrated blade.

Fear purer than any she'd known during the last eight days (which was to say, ever) carried Lisa backwards, out of range of those glass weapons. For an instant, the impulse to run, to flee out of the tunnel, out of the motel, to climb into her car with its broken window and drive as far away from all this as fast as she could almost overcame her. Her assurances to Madame Sosostris (and Gary), her angry vow to herself, echoed hollowly in her memory. The green shrieking had subsided, but that allowed her to hear the fragments of glass embedded in Sefira dragging against one another as she advanced, surrounding her in a screeching fugue. Had her stomach not emptied itself already, the terror Lisa felt would have precipitated that event now. Could she outrun Sefira? She couldn't say, but she found the prospect of showing her back to this monster absolutely unappealing. Incredible as it seemed, the only reasonable course of action appeared to be confrontation. Lisa reached behind her back with her right hand and slipped the butcher knife from the waistband of her jeans.

The weapon's effect on Sefira was immediate. Eyes wide, she halted where she was. The knife's appearance startled Lisa, as well. The names and symbols scratched on its blade were shining, glowing with white light, weird constellations in a metal sky. The glow reflected off Sefira's glass armor, making of its shards a kaleidoscope. Her fear tempered if not extinguished, Lisa held the knife ready to stab straight out, her left hand in front to deflect whatever attack Sefira might attempt. (Though she didn't like her fingers' odds against the shards jutting from Sefira's flesh.) Lisa spat again. Voice wavering, she said, "Can we talk?"

No answer. All of Sefira's attention appeared focused on the butcher knife.

"I'm here for what you took from Gary," Lisa said. "I followed your trail. I dealt with the people you left for me—your traps. I handled the men from the front office. I came through the ticks—the soul cages. I'm prepared for you if I have to be. I don't know if I can kill you, but I'm pretty sure I can hurt you; pretty badly, I think. I'm wondering if there's a way it doesn't

have to come to that, if you can give me what I want, I can leave, and that's it."

The skin around Sefira's mouth shifted, puffing into a pair of lips, while the needles in her gums retracted, leaving a set of squared teeth in their wake. When she spoke, it was in the same honeyed tones Lisa had heard in her car, on her phone. "Come to make a deal with the Devil?" she said.

"You're hardly the Devil," Lisa said.

"I'm as close as you're going to get."

"That may be. You're half right: I'm here to deal."

"Is that what you call it?" Sefira said. "I give you what is rightfully mine, and you give me… what was that? Oh yes, nothing."

"You weren't listening to me. You return Gary's heart to me, and in return, I don't kill you."

"Try to kill me," Sefira said, "which is hardly much to bargain with."

"All right then," Lisa said, "what do you want?"

"I have what I want," Sefira said. "You seem to believe you can threaten me with pain—that pain is something I'm afraid of. It's almost charming. Where I'm from, pain is a fact of life. It's like sunlight or air for you, part of the surroundings, taken for granted. And it's been that way for—as long as I can remember. I know there was a before-time, but honestly, it was so long ago, it might as well never have been. What I'm trying to say is, you're going to have to do better than that."

"I intend to," Lisa said, and lunged with the knife.

She was hoping to catch Sefira by surprise, plant the blade in her chest before she knew what was happening. Fast as she was, though (and she was fast, faster than she ever had been), Sefira still succeeded in moving her right arm to deflect the attack; although the edge of the blade found the space between two of the glass shards jutting from her skin and cut a deep slice there. Thank God for the rubber bands wound around the knife handle, which allowed her to maintain her grip on the weapon as Sefira jerked her arm away, hissing.

"I'm sure you didn't feel that," Lisa said, resuming her guard position.

“Bitch,” Sefira said. She pressed her arm to her chest. Clear fluid oozed from the wound.

“I’m trying.”

Sefira snapped a back-fist with her left arm, but Lisa anticipated the blow and swayed out of its reach. She was less prepared for the right kick Sefira followed with, a roundhouse that fell short of its target, the nerve cluster in Lisa’s left thigh, but still dragged the glass razors capping her toes across Lisa’s leg, ripping her jeans and the skin beneath. With a, “Fuck!” Lisa shuffled back, her heel striking the handle of the fire ax where she had dropped it. Eyes on Sefira, she knelt, feeling for the ax with her lead hand. Her fingers closed on the haft as Sefira leapt at her. She flung the ax across the floor, putting what spin on it she could. Sefira attempted to hop over it, but she mistimed the jump and landed with her left foot on the handle, throwing her into a stumble that she barely arrested in time to keep herself from running onto the out-held knife. While Sefira was off balance, Lisa attacked, stabbing and slashing, pressing her advantage. Sefira met her blows with her good arm and then her injured arm, metal and glass ringing against one another. Lisa drew blood a couple more times. Neither wound was as deep as her initial strike, though Sefira exhaled sharply at each. She aimed a sweep at Lisa’s left leg, but with a speed of which she would not have believed herself capable, Lisa pulled her leg out of reach while reversing the knife, which she drove into Sefira’s thigh with such force it pierced through to the other side. Shrieking, Sefira pulled back. This time, the rubber bands wrapping the knife handle were not sufficient to allow Lisa to maintain her grip on it. Eyes full of shock and panic, Sefira staggered and went down on the knee of her injured leg, grabbing the knife’s hilt and attempting to work the blade free. Lisa moved toward her.

During her karate classes, the portion Lisa had found most challenging was free sparring. Not because she was too timid: in fact, just the opposite. She had been an enthusiastic combatant, her punches and kicks fueled by the anger toward her opponent she summoned as soon as she crossed the sparring ring’s blue tape boundary. At the tournaments at which she had competed as a white and yellow belt, her forcefulness had led to a string of victories. Once she was promoted to her green belt, however, and began facing more experienced fighters both at her dojo and at those same

competitions she formerly had dominated, the effectiveness of her strategy decreased, as her opponents were less likely to be overwhelmed by her onslaught, and more likely to find and exploit the openings it provided them. Discouraged, she skipped one tournament, which became two, which became the entire fall season. To the instructors at her school who asked if anything was wrong, she claimed a desire to focus on other aspects of her training, her hand techniques, forms, and self-defense combinations, which she did, but with a falling off in the enthusiasm she had previously brought to them.

Finally, after a sparring class at which she lost every match, including one against a beginning student she should have defeated easily, a senior student, a brown belt named Jess, had taken her out to Pete's Corner Pub for a postmortem of her performance. Her assessment of Lisa's losses was simple: "Your problem is, you're fighting angry." "Isn't that how you're supposed to fight?" Lisa said. Jess shook her head, sipped her hard cider. "You're confusing anger and aggression," she said, "which is normal. Most people think that if you're going to fight, even if it's free sparring, you need to get mad. That's because for normal people, it's actually kind of hard to engage another person physically. They have to work themselves up to it. The problem is, anger's unreliable. It makes you frontload your attacks, so by the end of the fight, you're gassed out. It makes you sloppy, reckless, gives your opponents all kinds of opportunities they never should have had. Sound familiar?" Lisa nodded, color rising in her cheeks. "If you want to continue sparring," Jess said, "you have to transition from anger to aggression. Aggression is forceful, but it's calmer. It's smarter. It combines technique and training. Your emotions may still run high, but you channel them into helping you fight a better fight." Jess drank more of her cider. "If you work on developing your aggression, you could kick my ass, easy." While perhaps overselling the approach, the certainty with which Jess had delivered this prediction had encouraged Lisa to resume sparring. It was a cliché out of every sports movie she had ever watched, the seasoned veteran giving the promising but frustrated rookie the advice that would allow them to advance to the next level of performance, but Jess's reframing of how to approach fighting worked for Lisa, and while Jess had left the karate school shortly thereafter—headed to Alaska for reasons of which Lisa hadn't been

clear—Lisa suspected that, had her senior stuck around, her prediction might have come true.

Now that the contest with Sefira was well and truly under way, this was the mode into which Lisa had entered, funneling her dread and horror into watching Sefira's every motion, looking for the hint of her next attack. She was angry, too, the accumulated shocks and travails of the last eight days having heaped fuel on an emotion hot enough to liquefy steel, a fury venting from deep within her bones. She could feel the sulfurous cloud she had drawn within herself outside Denver, when her teeth had changed, and which had threatened to erupt from her during her most recent conversation with Gary, loose in her blood, rolling through her, its tumult making her move faster, strike harder. Somewhere in the depths of her mind, a voice murmured something about consequences, but she ignored it.

Clenching teeth returned to fangs, Sefira drew the butcher knife from her leg, clear fluid spilling from the wound to spatter on the floor. With the weapon in her left hand, she pushed to her feet. Lisa circled to Sefira's right, considering a grab for the ax lying behind her. Sefira anticipated her plan and shoved the ax away with her injured leg, grimacing at the effort. Keeping her distance, Lisa continued to circle, arms up and in close. Sefira feinted with her right arm, stabbed with her left, but Lisa shuffled out of range. Sefira retreated, moving, Lisa realized, toward the motel and the prospect of escape. Attempting to bait her into continuing the fight, Lisa moved closer than she would have liked, in danger of the knife's blade, its characters still glowing through the transparent film of Sefira's blood. Sefira slashed at her; Lisa twisted out of the way and aimed a hammer-fist at her hand that would have taken the knife out of it had she connected. Sefira swept the blade back in the opposite direction, dragging its tip across the top of Lisa's forearm. Lisa threw a roundhouse kick at Sefira's right knee, but she missed, and Sefira came close to repeating her move and stabbing the knife through Lisa's thigh.

To either side of them, the soul cages trembled in their gutters, filling the passageway with their metal shivering. Sefira snapped a front kick at Lisa that she blocked by turning to her right and lifting her leg, which put her in a position to throw a side kick into Sefira's midsection, the force of which staggered Sefira backward. Her wounded leg gave out, and she tripped into

the trench full of soul cages behind her. The force of her fall crushed a host of the objects, releasing their mingled screams in a heavy green fog. Sefira struggled to right herself, but the remaining soul cages took advantage of her proximity to unfold their legs and proboscises and grasp at her limbs. She swatted away some, but there were too many for her to deal with them all, and they stabbed her arms and legs, her sides and her neck. Shouting with rage, Sefira climbed out of the channel, hung with the soul cages. She sliced them from her with the butcher knife, tore them loose with her other hand, green shrieking swirling about her.

Lisa positioned herself between Sefira and the route to the motel. Clear blood leaking from a score of punctures, Sefira snarled, brandishing the knife. Lisa readied for her attack, but before Sefira could strike, she convulsed, her back arching, her arms flailing, as the pain the soul cages had injected slammed into her. Even with the screams dyeing the air, Sefira's were audible. Based on her experience with only two sets of memories, Lisa would have estimated ten times that amount fatal, or, at the very least, incapacitating. Although she swayed drunkenly, however, Sefira kept both her footing and her hold on the butcher knife, swinging the weapon from side to side. She shook her head, trying to dislodge the memories cramming her mind. Lisa didn't think Sefira was seeing her, but wasn't sure enough to draw any nearer. Instead, she followed Sefira as she limped out of the screaming cloud along the passageway, brandishing the knife. Accompanied by the soul cages' shrieks, they moved past the skulls cemented to the walls, Lisa stooping to retrieve the ax, through a stretch of tunnel whose white plaster was covered in streaks of charcoal, arcs and spirals and twists that almost appeared to be writing, characters in an alphabet strangely familiar. A few of the swirls seemed to cohere into words she could read: "altar," "cell," and "meat."

Ahead, the passage opened into a larger space, a cave the size of a small house. Its walls were hung with a tapestry of drapes, some bright and new, others faded and worn. As Lisa entered it, the chorus of screaming diminished almost to nothing, as if she had traveled a great distance from it. Sefira made a beeline towards a trio of long metal tables positioned at the chamber's center, a phalanx of floor lamps, their electric cords cemented into the floor, glowing around them. Atop one of the tables sat a large red

cooler, its white lid open, Sefira's goal. The sight of the plain plastic container was somehow as shocking as anything Lisa had encountered, its pebbled surface a reminder of the violence that had set her on this course, brought her to this destination. She ran at Sefira, holding the ax out in both hands crosswise. Already facing the tables, Sefira couldn't turn in time to meet Lisa's charge. The ax handle pinned her right arm against her body as Lisa's momentum pushed her into the rows of lamps, tipping them into one another and over like so many skinny, clanging dominoes, their bulbs popping against the floor, their shades rolling loose. Astonishingly, Sefira did not release the knife, even as the lamps fell on and across her, forming a makeshift cage. Stepping back, Lisa shifted her grip on the ax, raised it, and swung it at Sefira's head. With her free hand, Sefira grabbed a lamp and levered it in front of her, deflecting the ax head in a shower of sparks. She whipped the lamp at Lisa, its shade crumpling, its bulb smashing against the side of her head with sufficient force to make her vision flare white, cause her to stumble. Lamps clashing off one another, Sefira pushed free of them. Lisa went to raise the ax, but Sefira seized the handle, pulling it out of Lisa's hands and casting it away. In one fluid motion, she stepped forward and caught Lisa in a headlock, hugging her face against the jagged arch of her side. The headlock wasn't perfect—Lisa was able to wedge her chin and mouth under Sefira's forearm—but she was still reeling from the blow Sefira had dealt her, and it was sufficient to hold her.

"I'm going to tell you something," Sefira said. She aimed the tip of the butcher knife at Lisa's left eye. "You lost."

Lisa opened her mouth as wide as she could and bit into Sefira's arm, her razored teeth slicing into glass-studded flesh. Blood the taste of burnt metal flooded her mouth. Sefira screamed, her hold slacking. Teeth sunk in stringy muscle, Lisa caught Sefira's left hand in both of hers and broke the wrist. The knife dropped. At the same time, Lisa tugged her head back, tearing away a ragged mouthful of Sefira's forearm. Sefira shouted, releasing Lisa and shoving her away. Lisa spat the chunk of bitter meat onto the floor and picked up the knife. Cradling her right arm, an expression on her face that might have been incredulity, Sefira watched as Lisa closed the distance separating them.

“But you lost,” she said, in the instant before Lisa drove the knife through the glass shards layering her chest and into her heart. Blood fountained out of the wound. Sefira started to raise her left hand toward her chest, as it to verify the blade piercing it. Through the handle, Lisa felt the organ shudder to a halt. Sefira’s arm went limp. As the realization of what had just happened overtook her, Sefira’s features tightened with fear, as if she could see the hell she had fled so long coalescing in the surrounding shadows. Then her eyes lost focus and she collapsed, her glass armor tinkling. Lisa left the knife in her.

For a moment, there was something standing where Sefira had been, a collection of smoky lines like a sketch of her. The figure drew in on itself, as if it was being drawn through a seam in the air, and was gone. The curtains hanging on the walls shifted. Sefira’s corpse rustled; Lisa watched it shrivel, the flesh drying to dust, the glass fragments clouding and cracking. In a matter of seconds, all that remained of her was a heap of dust and broken glass surrounding the butcher knife, all in the midst of a pool of viscous, colorless blood, which was beginning to soak into the floor.

A profound exhaustion descended on Lisa, the prolonged adrenaline high that had carried her through the fight with Sefira deflating, leaving her dizzy and weak. The punctures in her calf and thigh, the slices to her leg, the trailing cut to her arm burned. The copper flavor of her own blood mixed with the acrid residue of Sefira’s. She hawked, spat, wiped her chin with the back of her hand. Her lips trembled. Unconsciousness threatened to take her whole, and it was all she could do not to succumb to it. She closed her eyes, concentrated on slowing her heart’s thunderous gallop to a canter, then a trot, then a pace approaching a walk.

When she opened her eyes, she saw the cooler waiting for her, the object of her nightmarish quest. Knees unsteady, she picked her way through the ranks of lamps to the metal table on which it rested. Obscured by the container’s red bulk, the table was spread with what appeared to be a dozen pieces of rock candy, their fragmented surfaces the color of honey. Below the amber clusters, Gary floated within the table’s polished surface, naked, his chest open, his face blank. Lisa looked inside the cooler. It was empty. Dread tightening her throat, she lifted one of the lumps of candy and saw encased in it a curl of meat. She checked another, a third, all of them, but

the results were the same. The conclusion was inescapable: here were Gary's heart, the other pieces of him Sefira had extracted, prepared and ready for consumption.

Sefira was right: she had lost.

10

While Lisa was concealing the butcher knife under the spare, Madame Sosostris came hurrying out of the purple house after her. "What is it?" Lisa said, lowering the trunk.

"Listen," Madame Sosostris said, "there's something you should know. When I did the drawing, the blank card…"

"You mean the white one? What about it? What does it mean?"

"That's just it: it doesn't mean anything. Or it means everything. I know, I'm not making any sense. I'm sorry. Let me try again. The cards I drew for you function not only on their own, but in relation to one another. Think of it as the way the words in a sentence can affect one another's meaning, and you'll have the basic idea. The blank card destabilizes the reading the other cards construct, usually because there's some element at play the deck can't accommodate."

"Are you saying the information you gave me is wrong?"

"No." Madame Sosostris shook her head. "It's more a case of, it's incomplete, which, given the gravity of the circumstances, can't be a good thing."

"Is there anything we can do about it?"

"Not that I know of. But the last person I drew a white card for was Aubrey Byrne."

"Your friend," Lisa said, "the one Gary met in Hell."

"Him."

Lisa shut the trunk. "Thank you for telling me this," she said, "but I better get going."

Overhead, a meteor streaked to its fiery end. What kind of omen it was, if any, Lisa could not guess, nor did she ask Madame Sosostris. For her part,

the medium said nothing.

11

Hands pressed flat on the metal table, Lisa regarded the candied slices of Gary's organs. Beneath them, Gary lay inside the reflection, unmoving. Lisa still could not bear to look at the open cavern of his chest, which, considering all she had seen, was odd, but there you had it. The nerves in her legs, her arm, were aflame, a foul taste on her tongue. She stared at what had been Gary's heart, now an assortment of blocky shapes. A vast, nameless emotion, something like grief, surrounded her.

Had Madame Sosostris known—had she foreseen this would be the endpoint of Lisa's journey? How was that possible? She had said that killing Sefira would undo any magic she'd performed, hadn't she? Yes, although Lisa hadn't asked her to clarify the statement, to describe exactly what would happen; instead, she had imagined that once Sefira was no more, Gary would be magically restored to wholeness, the same way, in vampire movies, the destruction of the principle vampire cured everyone in the process of becoming a vampire. (And as her eyes and teeth had steadily changed, she had added her own condition to the list of things Sefira's death would reverse—yet she was as yet untransformed.) *Different monster, different rules* (apparently). Was that the significance of Madame Sosostris's last, cryptic warning, an attempt to prepare her for this moment? If that was the case, if she had known this was coming, then why send Lisa on the road? Why subject her to the last eight days?

She reached for the nearest chunk of candy, picked it up. Its rough surface was warm, as if it had been produced only a short time ago. She raised it to her nose. The smell was incredible, overpowering, a sweet, creamy odor that caused her mouth to fill with saliva, roused her stomach, still aching, to hunger. She quickly replaced the block on the table. As she did, Gary's image flinched. "Hello?" she said. "Gary? Can you hear me?"

He did not respond. She could feel his presence within the mirrored space, even as she was simultaneously aware of him lying on a cot in the basement of Madame Sosostris's house in Huguenot, the sensation of a piece with her ability to read the graffiti outside the entrance to this room, her knowledge

that the metallic ticks were called soul cages. She slid another chunk of candy across the table, and saw Gary wince.

Maybe “undo” wasn’t the correct word to describe the effect Sefira’s death would have on her actions. Maybe the kinds of things she’d done couldn’t be undone. If they couldn’t be reversed, though, maybe they could be loosened from the intention that had prompted them, unknotted from the plans they were part of and… what? Repurposed? Discarded, abandoned? She wasn’t sure exactly what she was contemplating. Did she want to release Gary into death, into whatever might be awaiting him aside from a return trip to the Broken Land? Or did she want to keep him here, make of him a servitor? *My own personal zombie*. Apparently, resuming the life she had been living a little more than a week ago was not in the cards. Did that mean she would have to assume Sefira’s role, prey on the faithless, the lonely, and the weak? The prospect was revolting. Should she remove herself from this place, seek more infernal surroundings? Assuming she could figure out how to travel there, she couldn’t believe she’d be welcome in the Broken Land. Was there another hell to receive her? During their exchange in the car, Sefira had called her something new, not unlike Madame Sosostris’s blank card. Was she to found a new inferno, rule as a queen over a populace of the damned, hand-selected, Gary enslaved beside her? The image was equal parts absurd and repugnant.

If nothing else, she could leave the sugared remnants of Gary’s heart on the table and walk away, exit the chamber without a backward glance. She could withdraw what remained in her bank account, use it to help her establish a new life, leave Madame Sosostris to worry about Gary. Except, with her eyes and especially her teeth in the condition they were, how was she supposed to accomplish the first part of her plan? Nor did the second half sit well with her. Not because she owed anything to Gary: she had saved him from the worst of Sefira’s plans for him, and at a far higher cost than she had anticipated paying. If things between them weren’t exactly balanced, though, she was prepared to let that be. No, what bothered her about the idea of leaving matters unresolved had more to do with her, with her desire to see what she had started through to a conclusion, however imperfect.

Doubtless, there were other possibilities she was not thinking of, but at the moment, only one avenue appeared open. Before she could change her mind, she selected the nearest piece of candy and bit it in half.

Its flavor was like nothing she had tasted, a rush of milky sweetness that did not clash with, but rather accentuated, the rich iron redness of the meat. She swallowed the bite and popped the rest of the candy in her mouth, reaching for another. The flavor expanded on her tongue, gaining in depth and complexity as she chewed. She should be horrified at herself, disgusted, which she supposed she was, but those emotions diminished to insignificance beside the pleasure overflowing her mouth. The rush of sensation reached out to and encompassed the sulfurous turbulence still subsiding in her veins. Within the table's silver space, something was happening to Gary, he was thrashing from side to side, his eyes squeezed shut, his teeth gritted. But though she noticed him writhing below her, she continued to devour the candied chunks, whose taste assumed hints of fruits, peaches, pears, and apples. Contained within its subtleties was a world of knowledge, as if to experience this delight was to enter the consciousness that had devised it. She understood what was written on the threshold to this room, the precise non-location of the place and how to reach the Broken Land from it, the nature of the swarms and how to summon and employ them. And there was more, much more, waiting for her attention.

The candied meat was done, nothing left of it but a sweet residue Lisa sucked from her fingertips, nicking them on her teeth. It didn't matter; the copper tang added to the flavor. She looked at the table, saw her reflection gazing back at her, her black eyes glassy, a bit of candy stuck to her bottom lip. Of Gary, there was no trace. That was all right. She knew—or, she knew that she knew what had happened to him. He was in her power, hokey as the words sounded. She would have to decide what to do with him.

She realized how easy it would be to conceal her appearance, not restore so much as disguise it. No longer caged within her marrow, the yellow cloud and the force it embodied was hers to use as she saw fit. Her image rippled, and she was once more Lisa Martinez. Her wounds complained; she concentrated and closed them.

There was no reason for her to remain here. She could occupy Sefira's nest, but to what end? There was another of her kind, she now knew, a member of the Shattered Company, roaming the western edge of the continent, and the moment she became aware of Sefira's destruction, she would be on her way to challenge Lisa for the Hide-Away Motel. Having defeated one succubus, she felt reasonably confident of her ability to repeat the act, but why should she? She was not interested in adopting the job of demon slayer. What she most wanted was to return to her house and her bed, haunted by bitter memories as they were.

Leaving the cooler where it was, she picked her way through the mass of lamps. As she did, she licked the last fragment of candy from her lower lip, savoring the brief burst on her tongue. It was going to be difficult not to taste that sweetness again, especially now that she knew how to prepare it. On her way out of the chamber, she took the butcher knife.

Natalia, Queen of the Hungry Dogs

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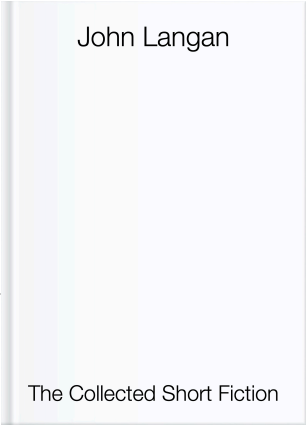

In Memoriam Lucius Shepard

I

When it came, Hunter's e-mail was brief, blunt. "Well," it read, "that's wife number three packed her bags and gone. Said she cared too much to watch this thing have its way with me. Pity. If she'd stuck it out a little longer, she'd have done quite well for herself. She may still. I haven't told the lawyers. Anyway. The doc says it's a matter of weeks, at most. Why don't you come up for a couple of days? Bring a bottle of something good. Maybe two. You know the way."

"What should I do?" Carl asked his wife after she had read the message over his shoulder.

"You mean you aren't going?" Melanie said.

"No, I am going."

"Then what… Ah. You don't know how long you'll be there."

"He shouldn't be on his own. Not now."

"Doesn't he have a daughter?"

"They haven't spoken for fifteen years. She stopped talking to Hunter when he married the second time. I suppose it's never too late, except it almost is."

"What about his brothers and sisters? Isn't he one of four?"

"They don't talk much. There's one brother he's on good terms with, but he lives in Austria."

"Well, it isn't as if he's alone."

"Nurses aren't the same as family."

“You aren’t family.”

“I’m close enough.”

Melanie sighed. “You have coverage at the dojo?”

He nodded. “Indrani can do the four-thirty classes, and I’m pretty sure Tara and Jeff can teach the five-thirties. The only day I’m not certain about is Saturday. I’ll have to call Carmen, see if she’s available.”

“You should take the Subaru. I’m pretty sure I read something about there being snow on the ground in Vermont already.”

“Will do. And babe?”

“Yeah?”

“I love you.”

“Of course you do.”

II

Of the many stories Hunter Kang had shared with him over three decades of friendship, the one Carl Kimani returned to as he packed for the trip to South Burlington, was that of Hunter’s first death. “Not near death,” Hunter had said. “Death. I was gone for at least five minutes before I was revived.” They had been sitting at a booth in Pete’s Corner Pub in Huguenot, drinking Heinekens, after a particularly grueling workout at their karate school. They had known each other six months.

“What happened?” Carl said.

“Riptide,” Hunter said. “My dad decided to take the family to the Jersey Shore. This was after my little sister died—I told you about Natalie, right?”

Carl nodded.

“That’s right, I did. We had been in mourning for, it must have been a year by then. Dad packed us into the van, including Mom, who insisted she didn’t want to go, and drove to Point Pleasant. Sprang for three rooms at the Neptune Motel, one for him and Mom, one for my older sisters, and one for me and my little brother. It was…” Hunter shook his head, smiling. “Man, it was fantastic. One of the best things my old man ever did. Maybe the best. We spent our days at the beach, with a break at lunchtime for subs at a deli

a couple of blocks away. At dinner, we had pizza or hamburgers, and were allowed to watch TV in our rooms until eleven o'clock, which was unheard of. You remember *Simon & Simon*?"

"Sure."

"That was the first time I ever saw that show. I loved it. Anyway, our second to last day at the beach, I swam into a riptide. The next thing I knew, I was being carried away from everybody, out to sea. I didn't know what to do. I tried swimming toward shore, but I wasn't strong enough to keep myself in place, let alone fight my way to the beach. I started to panic. It wasn't long before I was screaming for help, waving at the rest of my family. At first, they thought I was showing off. By the time they realized what was happening, I was going under.

"If you were forced to pick a way to die, drowning isn't the worst. Don't get me wrong, it's pretty bad at the start. You thrash and cry, struggling to keep the water out of your mouth and nose. In what seems like a matter of seconds, though, you're overcome by a feeling of tremendous peace, and you let the process that's started, continue. After I went under for the final time, I looked at the water around me, which was this luminous blue, and thought this was the color of death, and it was beautiful. Even at this age—we're talking eleven years old—I was aware that what I was experiencing was a kind of gift, not like what Natalie had been through, the year before.

"My sister Vicky was the one who reached me first, and not my other sister Heather, which was strange, because Heather was on the swim team at her high school, and Vicky was captain of the chess club. Vicky also knew that the way out of a riptide is not to swim against it, but sideways to it, parallel to the shore, until you're free. This was what she did. As she was turning toward the beach, Heather joined her, and together, my sisters brought me in. When they delivered me to my dad, though, I was dead. No heartbeat, no breathing. If you could have hooked me up to an EEG, I'm sure it would have showed no brain activity.

"For what might have been the first time in his life, Dad froze. Here was a man who had immigrated to the US from Busan with a degree in graphic design and a bank account with just enough in it to let him live outside LA for three months. At the end of six weeks, he had a job with a small

advertising company; within six years, he was chosen to head up their office in West New York. During that time, he met my mom, which meant dealing with her parents. Let me tell you, however progressive their voting record, when it came to whoever was dating their Lily, Grandpa and Grandma McMaster were not terribly thrilled with their daughter dating and then becoming engaged to an Asian. Apparently, Grandma said to her, 'Marriage is hard enough as it is. Why do you want to complicate it?' Nice, huh? But the two of them stuck to their guns, and when Dad moved east, he took his wife and young daughters with them. Together, they built a life for themselves in Jersey. The family expanded, two boys and another girl. At five, his youngest daughter was diagnosed with a rare form of bone cancer, which took two agonizing years to kill her. Throughout all of it, he had remained steadfast. Mom called him her rock, and I think the rest of us viewed him that way, too. Now here I was lying lifeless in his arms, a second child lost within the span of twelve months. It was too much.

"Fortunately for everyone, my mom hauled me away from him and dropped me onto the sand. She pumped my chest, turned me on my side to help the water pour out, rolled me on my back, pinched my nose, blew two breaths into my lungs, and started a set of chest compressions. My sisters, my brother, my father gathered around us, along with some other people who had witnessed Vicky and Heather dragging me out of the surf. One of the bystanders ran for a lifeguard (all of whom, needless to say, were fucking *useless*). Dad started to speak to Mom, words to the effect of, 'Honey, he's gone,' but she stopped him with a look that killed the sentence in his mouth. She labored over me. She pressed down on my sternum one, two, three, four, five times, switched to my head to fill my lungs, went back to working on my heart. The seconds advanced, each one carrying me that much further from her, but my mother's pace did not slacken. She was a dentist—did I ever tell you that? Met my dad when he came in with an abscess. Romantic, eh? She was six years older than he was. Packed up her practice in San Marino and opened a new one in Jersey City, while managing a steadily expanding family. When Natalie was given her diagnosis, Mom brought in a second and third dentist so she could spend the maximum time possible with her. She took my sister's death hard—not

that the rest of us didn't, but with Mom, it seemed almost personal, as if death had targeted her child, in particular.

"Well. Mom put all of her effort—her concentration, her strength, her will—into her fight with the Grim Reaper. It was as if she was prying his grip from me one bony finger at a time. Right as the ambulance pulled up in the parking lot, I opened my eyes and sucked in a gigantic breath. Heather shrieked. Dad burst into tears. The EMT's insisted on taking me to the hospital, which my parents agreed to. Mom rode in the ambulance with me. Dad followed with everyone else in the van. On the way there, as the EMT was fussing over me, Mom leaned in close and whispered, 'You know what happened to you.'

"I nodded. The fact of my death felt too enormous to fit into words; it crowded the back of the ambulance with us.

"She glanced at the EMT, and when he looked away to check something, she said, 'Did you see anything?'

"I knew what she was asking. I nodded again. 'Natalie,' I said.

"Mom inhaled sharply. 'Really?'

"'Really,' I said. 'She was glowing—she was surrounded by yellow light. She was wearing the Hello Kitty T-shirt she liked, the purple one, and her favorite jeans. She held out her hand to me, said where she was was beautiful and peaceful. That's all I remember. The next thing I knew, I was sitting up on the beach.'

"'Oh, baby,' Mom said. She sat back, one hand over her mouth, her eyes full of tears. 'Oh.' If the EMT noticed, which I'm sure he did, then I'm also sure he thought she was overcome by what had almost happened to me. He was half right. She didn't ask me anything else, not there, not during the day I spent in the hospital, not during the trip home. In fact, she never mentioned what I'd described to her again. But after that, I had the sense she wore her grief for my sister more lightly, as if it were no longer a heavy coat, but a light scarf."

Hunter raised his hand. "Before you ask, because how could you not, no, I did not see my little sister in a full-body halo. She did not speak to me. You want to know what I experienced while I was dead? Nothing. One moment, I was floating underwater, my vision closing off, and the next I was on the

beach, coughing up the water still in my lungs. In between was a blank. It wasn't like being asleep. I had no sense of the passage of time, no sense of anything. I simply… wasn't.

"Of course, I couldn't tell my mom any of that. I knew what she wanted to hear—what she needed to hear. So, I told her. I lied, but… when she was dying, she was at peace with it. On her deathbed, she told my sisters Natalie was coming for her."

After a sip of his beer, Carl said, "Not to play Devil's Advocate…"

"What?"

"The kid who went to twelve years of Catholic school would argue you didn't see the next life because you weren't heading there. It wasn't your time."

"I was dead. That sounds like it was my time."

"Not if God didn't want it to be."

"Yeah, well, tell your inner Catholic child to come talk to me after he's been dead for five minutes. Then we can compare notes, talk about what God wants."

III

On a clear, cold Wednesday morning in early November, Carl took I-87 from the Beacon-Newburgh exit north to Route 7, on the other side of Albany, which he followed east out of New York into Vermont. Once over the border, he turned north again with 7, driving along the western edge of the state, toward South Burlington, a place Hunter had declared among the most civilized small cities he had spent time in, with the perfect proportion of bookstores and good restaurants, and within easy distance of Canada, his second favorite country. "Although," he had added recently, "the way things are going here, it's edging closer to the top spot." Set on a hill a couple of miles southwest of the city, his large house was surrounded by evergreens, which did not diminish the view of Lake Champlain with the Adirondacks beyond from its windows. The fruit of Hunter's years as a photojournalist, as well as of a handful of prudent investments, the house was a source of mild envy for Carl, whose modest Cape was, now that the girls were at

college, plenty big enough for him and Melanie, especially with the garage converted into a study. But a spacious residence had been Carl's fantasy since a childhood spent sharing fifteen hundred square feet of raised ranch with his parents, older brother, and younger sisters.

When he expressed his jealousy to Melanie, his wife reminded him that Hunter's abode had been paid for by bullets zipping past him, once pinging off the helmet he almost never wore, not to mention, by threats from local warlords and field commanders, a few of which had drawn perilously close to coming true. His Pulitzer, his books, his house had been earned risking his life to show the world sights it didn't want to see, but needed to. All of which was true, nor had success curdled Hunter's personality. He was essentially the same guy Carl had met when they started karate classes together in their early twenties, at the Double Dragon Dojo in Poughkeepsie. These days, the principal difference in Hunter, as he himself liked to say, was that he could afford the top-shelf single malt he preferred. (In fact, he was part owner of a small distillery somewhere in Scotland; Carl couldn't remember its name.) Yet this did little to dilute Carl's envy for his friend's dwelling. As far as he was concerned, if you had to select a location in which to live out your last days, Hunter's was about as good as any.

Or so he thought. He wondered if Hunter shared his opinion, if he spent his time conscious of the understated beauty surrounding him, or if the prospect of his impending end, the one he'd already tasted, chased other concerns from his mind.

The road passed between the gnarled ranks of an apple orchard, and without warning Carl found himself remembering his first and only HIV test, taken at twenty-three, when he was not long out of a relationship which had given him a case of the crabs cured in one long night, and trust issues which would require longer to treat. Over a pitcher of cheap beer, he had relayed the tale of his ex-girlfriend and her infidelities to a coworker at the Office Max he was then assistant-managing. Instead of the chuckle and expression of commiseration he was expecting, Porter had stared at him with concern. "Dude," he said, "please tell me you were using protection."

"At first, sure," Carl said, "but then she was on the pill."

“Have you been tested?”

“For what?”

“What do you think? AIDS.”

“Oh,” Carl said, “I don’t think I—”

Porter cut him off. “You were having unprotected sex with a girl who was cheating on you with someone who passed on crabs to her. Who knows what else he might have given her?”

“But…”

“You really want to chance it?”

He didn’t, and so Carl had gone to the Department of Health to have his blood drawn; although, self-conscious about meeting someone he knew there, he drove twenty miles up the Hudson, to the office in Wiltwyck. After sitting on a molded plastic chair in the waiting room, Carl was directed to a closet-sized office, where he sat on another uncomfortable chair while a nurse dressed in a brown pantsuit and cream blouse asked him questions about his sexual and drug-use history before instructing him to roll up his sleeve. She filled a vial with his blood, taped a cotton ball over the spot on his arm, and gave him a slip of paper with his ID number on it and told him his results would be ready in two weeks.

Carl had spent that time trying not to think about the test’s outcome. In unguarded moments, though, he would recall his older brother’s best friend, Wayne Ahuja, who had suffered with and then died from AIDS-related complications over the course of a year and a half. Ever skinny, Wayne had become positively skeletal as his health worsened, his skin yellowing from the cancer consuming his liver. Toward the end, he had lost vision in his left eye, and for reasons of which Carl was unsure, had taken to walking with a cane. Throughout his decline, Wayne had retained an exasperated sense of humor, complaining of dying from a fling with a paralegal, and not a debauched weekend with Freddy Mercury. While he refused to be despondent—at least, publicly—about a month before he entered hospice care, Wayne said to Carl, “You know, I’m going to miss not seeing Paris.”

They were sitting on the back porch of Wayne’s mother’s condo in Beacon. Manny, Carl’s older brother, was helping Mrs. Ahuja in the kitchen. It was a

warm spring day, but Wayne was wearing a cardigan and a blanket draped over his shoulders. Carl said, “Paris?”

“I’m treading perilously close to stereotype, I know,” Wayne said. “I can’t help it. I’ve always loved France. When my father was alive, he used to fly to France for business. He always brought me a souvenir, a little Eiffel Tower, French comics. The way he described Paris made it sound like the most amazing, wonderful city. In high school, I took French 1, 2, 3, and 4, all with Madame McCarthy, who was a flake. My junior year, there was a class trip to Paris, but we couldn’t swing it, financially. My first real crush was on an exchange student from Besançon my senior year; he was beautiful and totally clueless, just thought I was very friendly. I’ll say. In college, I majored in French. One of my teachers, Claude, was from outside Paris, and I used to ask her about the city in my terrible French. I watched every French movie Blockbuster had on the shelves. I read *The Stranger*, first in English and then (slowly) in French. A lot of poets, too, Rimbaud and Verlaine, Baudelaire, Valéry. I liked Baudelaire the best; Rimbaud always seemed like he was trying too hard to play the bad boy.

“Anyway, my plan was, once I finished college, I would work for a couple of years, stay with Mom to save money, and then spend a summer in Paris. I intended to hit all the tourist spots, the Eiffel Tower, Notre Dame, the Louvre, Shakespeare & Co. I fantasized about finding a job while I was there, but hadn’t figured out how to make that happen. I wasn’t concerned. I assumed I had time. You know what they say happens when you assume?”

“You make an ass of you and me,” Carl said.

“There you have it.”

That was their last conversation; the next he saw Wayne, he was lying in his coffin in a funeral home in Fishkill. The final expression on his face suggested disappointment, as if, after his lengthy suffering, whatever Wayne saw approaching was anticlimactic. Carl had not forgotten the look, made uneasy by what it suggested.

The apple trees gave way to open fields dotted with rocks. As the date of his test result had approached, he remembered, he had noticed a sensation at the limit of his perception, not unlike the feeling of pressure his ears registered during a change in altitude. No amount of swallowing or

yawning affected this pressure; indeed, it strengthened each day. He noticed, too, the people and objects around him outlined ever-so-slightly in black, as if they were comic book illustrations and he aware of the inker's hand. He recognized the link between the sensation and the black haloes and understood both as by-products of his escalating anxiety. Yet he could not shake the suspicion that this was more than an elaborate hallucination, that he was perceiving these things more than inventing them. Perhaps they had always been present, waiting for a situation of sufficient duress to disclose them.

By the time Carl was driving Route 9 to the Rhinecliff-Wiltwyck Bridge, he had decided that what he had grown aware of was death, was the void, the nonexistence atop which everyone and everything sat like soap bubbles quivering on the surface of dark water. At any moment, an individual bubble might burst, or dwindle to nothing, and the remaining bubbles would shift to close the gap, and it would be as if the particular bubble had never existed. Crossing the bridge high over the Hudson, he felt himself as hollow as any mix of soap and water blown into a sphere, his life a momentary structure fated to collapse.

Threaded through this apprehension, however, was another, of the sheer loveliness surrounding him. From the mid-afternoon sunlight bright on the corrugated surface of the Hudson below, to the chrome shine of the bumper in front of him, from the fine hairs on the knuckles of his right hand resting on the steering wheel, to the long blades of green grass nodding on the other side of the road as he drove off the bridge, beauty met his eyes wherever he turned them. A long line of passengers waiting to board a Trailways bus for Manhattan might have been figures in a painting by Brueghel. The buildings on either side of Broadway glowed with Technicolor vibrancy. A group of children running home from school could have stepped fresh from Renaissance marble. The impression swelled like a great piece of music rising to a crescendo, in its own way as pitiless as the sense of death with which it was entwined. Lightheaded, he parked up the street from the Department of Health. He was in the grip of an experience more profound than any he had undergone since the death of his father two years before, a moment in some ways adjunct to the earlier one. It continued as he once again entered the small office, where a different nurse, wearing a green

dress and a necklace of large green beads, passed him a piece of paper on which he read the word NEGATIVE. Nor did it cease upon his return to his car, where he sat with the engine off and let relief spill through him. Perhaps the imminent dread of death lessened somewhat, but his recognition of the glory of the world did not. It held steady, even climbed a few rungs higher. By the next day, it would diminish considerably; while the morning following returned him to normal.

After that, the closest Carl drew to perceiving the raw, unfiltered beauty around him were the births of his daughters. Random moments in the intervening decades offered glimpses of loveliness, but nothing to compare with what he had known during his swing into death's orbit. He wondered if Wayne Ahuja had known the same beauty as he was dying, if perceiving the world's grace was compensation for losing it, if the disappointed expression on Wayne's face post-mortem was because whatever came next could not approach the beauty he was leaving.

On his left, the ground dropped to Lake Champlain, across whose shining breadth the Adirondacks stood in a line like the wall to some unimaginable kingdom, their jagged heights draped in snow.

IV

Despite previous assurances that he would do so, Hunter had not paved the long driveway to his house. It was a nod to privacy, a complement to the *NO TRESPASSING* signs nailed to the trees at the end of the drive; albeit, one easily overcome by anyone willing to take the quarter mile rutted dirt slowly enough to avoid scraping their vehicle's undercarriage. For most of its course, the driveway ran between dense rows of tall red pine. Amidst the trunks to the right, Carl glimpsed a figure in jeans and a red jacket, a woman walking beside a golden retriever, who ran and gamboled about her. *That didn't take long,* he thought; although the woman could as easily be Hunter's doctor, checking her patient's status, or his lawyer, here to review details of his will. She could have offered to take out the dog as a kindness. *Or maybe she's the reason his third wife left him.* Hunter had always been charming, to put it mildly. In fact, it was a particularly credible threat from one woman's angry boyfriend that had brought him to train at the Double

Dragon. His flirtations and an extended affair had strained his first marriage far past what Carl had been certain was its breaking point; the end of the same affair had undone marriage number two. With Hunter's third trip to the altar, Carl had wondered if his friend might be ready to settle, but it would hardly be surprising to learn that, even in the face of a terminal diagnosis, Hunter remained restless.

And what business is that of yours? Melanie might have been sitting in the car with him. *That isn't why you're here, is it?*

"No," he said.

The trees thinned and fell away, revealing the short hill atop which Hunter's house sat. The architect had been after something in the spirit of Frank Lloyd Wright, and had constructed a long wooden box with a flat roof and a western wall composed of two stories of windows, which Hunter said made the place a bitch to heat during the Vermont winters, but offered stunning views of the lake and the mountains. The driveway climbed through tall grass to a pair of garage doors set in the hillside below the southern end of the house. An olive, late-model Range Rover was parked in front of one of the doors, an older blue Volvo before the other. Carl tagged the Range Rover as Hunter's, the Volvo as belonging to his dog-walking guest. He stopped far enough behind the vehicles to allow either's departure. He retrieved the plastic shopping bag with the bottles of Auchentoshan and Talisker in it, and stepped out of the car for the walk up the stone steps to the front door. The air was cold and damp, brimming with the promise of snow.

Hunter opened the door as Carl was leaning to press the bell. "Hey!" he said, "You made it!" He looked terrible. The weight he had accumulated with his semi-retirement was gone, devoured by his sickness. He was as thin as he had been when he and Carl had met, thinner. A belt cinched on its last hole secured his jeans to his hips, while his blue and white flannel shirt enveloped him like a small tent. A faded blue baseball cap shielded a face drawn to the bone. Carl embraced him, and his friend felt insubstantial, more fabric than flesh. *It's as if he's already gone.* They released one another, and Hunter gestured at the shopping bag. "Is that what I think it is?"

“Water of life,” Carl said.

“Bit late for me,” Hunter said, “although I swear, it’s what’s brought me this far. You know how long the docs gave me? Three months. ‘Put your affairs in order,’ they said. ‘This is gonna be quick.’ That was nine months ago, almost ten, at this point. Who could have guessed? But come in, come in,” he said, retreating inside the house.

Carl followed, passing along the front hall to the living room, a vast open space across which were scattered couches, love seats, and easy chairs, all upholstered in the same black padding, each oriented more or less toward the large flat-screen TV hung on the wall to the left. A doorway in the same wall led down another hallway, past a number of closed doors on the right, a wall of windows on the left, which showed the tops of the red pines and, beyond them, a shining stretch of Lake Champlain, a cluster of the Adirondacks. They emerged into the kitchen, which was centered around a sizable island whose gray and white marble top glowed with the afternoon light. Hunter continued to another doorway, which admitted to a smaller room, its walls lined with tall bookcases stuffed with volumes shelved without apparent regard to size, subject, or author. Facing the windows and their view, a pair of easy chairs in the same black padding as the living room furniture flanked a small table, atop which rested a pair of glass tumblers and a jug of water. Seating himself on the far side of the table, Hunter nodded at the glasses and said, “There you go. I’ll trust you to decide which bottle we finish first.”

“You don’t think it’s a little early?” Carl said. “Don’t you want to have lunch?”

“Early was a long time ago,” Hunter said. “I’ll have Annie order us a pizza when she gets back. You like mushrooms? Don’t worry about it. We’ll order two pies. You can get what you want.”

“Fair enough,” Carl said. He removed the bottles from the bag, set them beside the glasses. “As I recall, you favor the Auchentoshan.”

“You recall correctly, sir.”

He poured three fingers’ worth into one tumbler, reached for the water. Hunter raised his left hand. “Don’t bother.”

“Do I have to give the speech about how the drop of water unlocks the Scotch’s flavors?”

“At this point, I prefer my experiences undiluted.”

“If you insist.” Carl placed the bottle on the table and settled into his chair.

“Ahhh,” Hunter said, smacking his lips after his first taste. “This is the stuff.”

“It’s even better with the water,” Carl said.

“You don’t let up, do you?”

“Nope.”

“Dying’s looking better and better.”

Carl supped from his glass. “What’s the latest on that?”

Hunter shrugged. “We’re in the bottom of the ninth, two outs, two strikes. Not much longer to go. Maybe a week or two. Maybe less.”

“You seem in pretty decent shape, all things considered.”

“You mean, for a guy who’s already a skeleton?”

“Is that what’s different about you? I thought it was your hair.”

“You’re not wrong about that.” Hunter removed his baseball cap, revealing a head rough with stubble.

“Chemo?”

“Yeah.” Hunter returned the cap to his head. “I stopped a month ago, once the docs told me there wasn’t any point. Had you seen me while I was on that stuff, you would’ve had no trouble believing the end was nigh. Since I discontinued it, I feel pretty good. You know, for a guy who’s on his way out. It’s strange: This is what got my mom. I’m five years older than she was, but in the end, heredity won.” Hunter raised his drink, frowned. “Goddammit, why is this empty?”

“Hang on,” Carl said, and poured him another generous portion of Scotch.

“Good man,” Hunter said.

“Still a no on the water?”

“Why do you insist on asking questions you know the answer to?”

“Hope springs eternal, or something.” Carl’s glass was almost finished. He refilled it with less than he’d served Hunter, added a drop of water. Outside, on the lake, a boat was heading south. Exactly what type of vessel it was, he couldn’t say, only that it was neither sailboat or speedboat. A yacht? Maybe. It appeared to be making good time; long waves rolled away from it in a V.

“What about you?” Hunter said. “How’s Melanie? How’re the girls? Everything okay at the dojo?”

“Good, good, and yes,” Carl said. “Melanie’s not long back from a trip out west to a couple of shows. She did pretty well at one of them, may have found a new outlet for her jewelry. Deb has one more semester to go at Binghamton, then she’s looking at NYU for her master’s. Art history. Karen’s at community college, leaning toward nursing. We’re up to a hundred and fifty students at the studio, give or take.”

“That is good.”

“I can’t complain.” Carl tipped his glass at Hunter. “Any word from—it was Jill, right?”

“Gillian, yes,” Hunter said. “And no, nothing. You never met her, did you?”

“Once,” Carl said. “At the party you had for your book, the one about New Orleans after Katrina.”

“*American Atlantis*.”

“That one. Melanie came with me. She met Jill, too. She didn’t like her.”

“Your wife is a very perceptive woman. Which is why I’ve never asked you what she says about me.”

“It’s not all bad. She thinks you have a good eye.”

“Coming from Mel, that’s high praise.”

“I take it Francesca hasn’t been in touch.”

“Believe it or not, she has. Nothing like your old man’s imminent demise to bring you to his doorstep. She was here last week for a few days. I wouldn’t call it a good visit, but I didn’t expect it to be. She had a chance to say what she wanted to. Where I could, I explained and apologized. Not everything that’s happened to her has been my fault. We left things about as good as we could.”

“I’m sorry, man.”

“At least I saw her.”

“How about the woman I saw on my way in? Walking a golden retriever? Is she—did you say her name was? Annie?”

Hunter nodded. “Her name is Antoinette, Antoinette Mazarine; although she prefers to be called Madame Sosostris. It’s… her professional name, I guess.”

“Exactly which profession is she in?”

“She’s a psychic, fortune-teller, that kind of thing. She’s here to help me with some stuff.”

“Such as?”

“Drink up,” Hunter said, emptying his tumbler and holding it out for more. Sunlight turned the lake into a sheet of bronze, made the mountaintops burn white.

V

At some point thereafter, Carl looked at the Auchentoshan and saw that the bottle was empty. Simultaneously, he realized that he was drunker than he had been in years, since his last visit with Hunter, when the two of them had stayed up after his book release party drinking their way down a bottle of high-quality rum, which Hunter took straight, and Carl mixed with various leftover sodas. The next morning, much to Melanie’s mingled amusement and irritation, he had suffered a hangover so blinding he crawled into the back seat of the car and lay there while she drove them home. “Melanie isn’t here,” he mumbled, the statement filling him with crushing sadness.

“What?” Hunter said.

“Nothing.” With great care, he leaned over and lifted the Talisker from the table. He attempted to remove the seal from the cap, which proved a far more laborious task than he thought it should be. Finally, he peeled the last bit of plastic from the bottle’s neck and twisted the stopper free.

“At last,” Hunter said. “I thought I was gonna die of thirst.”

“You live next to a lake,” Carl said, amazed at his ability to pour the contents of the bottle into his friend’s held-out glass.

“So?”

“So, there’s plenty of water there.” He gestured at the windows, outside of which, the water was dark blue, the mountains heaps of shadow crowned by clouds lit red and orange.

“Yeah,” Carl said, “but…”

“But what?”

“We’re almost—we—we only have one bottle left.” He nodded at the Talisker, whose contents were already noticeably diminished.

“Don’t worry,” Hunter said, “we can get more. There’s a liquor store in town.”

“Sure,” Carl said, “but neither of us can drive. Not like this, in this state, this state of drunkenness.” He was finding it difficult to express himself; he wasn’t sure the words he was using meant what he wanted them to.

“Not us,” Hunter said. “*Her.* Annie. Sosostris. Madame. When she goes for the pizza, she can pick up another bottle. Or two.”

“Oh. That’s okay, then.”

“See? Problem solved.”

“Wait. Did we order the pizzas?”

“Of course, we did. Remember? Mushroom for me, cheese for you.”

“I never said I wanted cheese.”

“Well, why didn’t you? It’s too late to change now.”

“No—I mean, I don’t think we called anyone.”

“We didn’t. Madame Annie did.”

Had she? Carl couldn’t recall anyone entering the study after the two of them, but neither could he bring the last couple of hours into focus. “Are you sure?”

“Sure I’m…” Hunter’s voice trailed off. “Dammit. Didn’t we?” He placed his glass on the table. “Tell you what. One more, and if the pizza isn’t here, we’ll go order it. Mushroom for me, cheese for you.”

“Hawaiian,” Carl said.

“What?”

“Hawaiian,” Carl said. “Or maybe you call it Canadian. I know I had it in Canada. At a knockdown tournament in Toronto. Ham and pineapple.”

“On a pizza?”

“It’s delicious.”

“Ugh.”

“That’s what I want. It’s delicious.”

“Whatever you say.”

“Hawaiian is what I say.”

“I thought it was Canadian.”

“Either way.”

There was more conversation after that, but Carl couldn’t keep track of it. Some of it involved Hunter lecturing. He was a great one for holding forth when in his cups, was Carl’s friend. “The French call them… What do they call them? *Les fantômes de*… something.” Hunter’s one last drink turned into another two, or three, and Carl tipped a couple more servings into his tumbler, and the Talisker was done, which seemed an unbelievable, a ridiculous amount for the two of them to have consumed in a couple of hours. Except the view out the windows had gone dark, and the room’s track lighting was glowing—had Hunter switched it on? Or did the study have some kind of light sensor? Or maybe that woman, Annie, had looked in on them and turned on the lights. Did it matter? No, what mattered was that their pizzas hadn’t appeared. Which meant that someone hadn’t delivered them. Or ordered them. No pineapple and mushrooms for them. From the windows, a pair of middle-aged men regarded them from the comforts of their padded easy chairs. *Jesus, when did we become so old?* Still holding his glass, Hunter heaved himself from his chair with such force he staggered forward a half dozen steps, almost losing his balance before recovering. Waving for Carl to follow him, he staggered from the room; although Carl wasn’t certain of his friend’s destination, the kitchen or some other spot deeper within the house. Either way, his eyelids had grown incredibly heavy, as had the rest of him. Full of Scotch, he supposed. Who

knew alcohol weighed so much? He set his tumbler on the table, closed his eyes, and unconsciousness rose over him in a flood.

VI

He woke needing to pee, urgently. On legs not fully awake, he lurched from the chair, swaying with the effort not to tip over. The room spun like a carnival ride winding down. *Still drunk,* he thought, though not quite as much as he had been. The utterly disconnected feeling had subsided, replaced by the sense of being on a one to two second delay, requiring the slightest bit more time to respond to his surroundings. There was a bathroom somewhere nearby. At different moments throughout the afternoon and evening, he and Hunter had risen to seek it out. *On the other side of the kitchen, on the way to the living room. Third door on the left.*

Though the kitchen seemed to have expanded dramatically since he had crossed it last, he succeeded in navigating to the hallway where the toilet was. His bladder relieved, he exited the room and continued along the hall to the living room, whose assorted seating was dimly visible in the moonlight falling through the windows. Whether Hunter had shown him his room, he couldn't remember, nor was he sure enough of his recall of the house's layout, especially drunk and in the dark, to want to search for it. He would crash on one of the couches. First, he would have to venture out to the car for his bag.

As he exited the front door, a pair of lights clicked on to either side of it. The temperature had plunged; his breath vented from his mouth in a cloud. Mist floated near the ground. The steps to the driveway sparkled with frost; he descended them with care. At the foot of the steps, another set of lights, these positioned over the garage doors, snapped to life. Down here, the mist rose higher, denser, catching the light and holding it, submerging the cars in a lake of pale radiance. It was colder here, too. Gooseflesh raised up and down his arms. Carl hurried to the Subaru and lifted his bag from the back seat. He shut the door, and caught something out of the corner of his right eye.

Standing near the edge of the woods, a child regarded him. The mist reduced it to an Impressionist blur, but its size suggested eight or nine. It

appeared underdressed for the cold in a red T-shirt and jean shorts. A sleepwalker? From where? Did Hunter allow campers on his property? Who would want to spend the night outside in this weather? Carl took a step forward, halted. There was something else out there. Closer to the tree line, a pair of shapes paced back and forth, weaving in and out of the pines. Lean, low to the ground, they could have been mountain lions, except their trunks were too long, their legs spread to either side in a way that suggested a spider's limbs more than a big cat's. Their heads, too, something was off about the heads, a disfigurement the mist would not allow him to see clearly. They were too long. Fear icier than the air sliced through his intoxication. Could these be dogs? They didn't seem to be menacing the child, at least, not yet. He dropped his bag and felt in the front pocket of his jeans for the knife tucked there (ironically, a gift from Hunter). He considered calling the house on his cell, but his friend was likely to be deeply unconscious; nor was Carl certain of Annie's location. Knife retrieved, its blade unfolded, he advanced toward the child, his eye on the twin creatures behind it.

The closer he drew to all three, however, the harder they were to see. The mist thickened until only the glow of the lights at his back indicated direction. Left hand up in a guard, right ready to stab, he moved in small steps, sliding the soles of his sneakers over the ground to minimize an attacker's ability to knock him off his feet. "Hello," he said. "My name is Carl. I don't know if you can see me, but I'm walking to you. I don't want you to be frightened, but there are a couple of animals out here with us. They're probably just dogs, but I don't know them, so I think it's a good idea to be careful. Can you tell me what your name is?"

In reply, the air erupted in high pitched laughter, like the lunatic cries of a pack of hyenas. Carl started, his heart hammering at the base of his throat. He stopped where he was. The hysterical yelps subsided, replaced by a new sound, the scrape of skin over dirt. Something was treading a wide circle around him; he was reasonably certain it was not the child. The hairs on the back of his neck lifted. He turned with the noise, doing his best to keep the knife aimed at whatever was producing it. *Of course,* a voice in the back of his brain said, *this would be a good way to distract you from an attack to*

the rear. “One thing at a time,” he murmured. *Should have held on to the bag, could have used it as a shield.* “Too late, now.”

Without warning, the lights over the garage went out. Momentarily blind, Carl tensed, listening for the paws he was certain were about to run at him. None did. As his eyes adjusted to the dark, he saw that the mist had thinned to a fine vapor, and that he was at the edge of the woods. Of the featureless child, the strange predators, there was no sign. He stared into the trees, but if anyone was standing amidst their dim ranks, he could see neither them nor any animals.

For a second time, manic laughter filled the air. Glancing over his shoulder as he went, Carl retreated to his car, bending at the knees to retrieve his bag. Finally, the garage lights popped on. He was half expecting to find the child standing at his elbow, one of the big predators ready to pounce, but there was nothing there.

VII

Certain he would not be falling asleep any time soon, if ever, Carl dumped his bag next to the biggest couch in the living room before heading to the kitchen. Although his nerves were humming with adrenaline, he could feel the drag of the alcohol his system had not processed. He found a glass in one of the cupboards and poured and drank four and a half cups of water. Given how much Scotch he had imbibed, there was no way he was escaping a hangover, but he figured he would do what he could to minimize it. Depositing the glass in the sink, he returned to the living room, where he settled onto the couch. He had no idea what time it was, only that it was late, far later than he was accustomed to being awake these days. *Old*, he thought, *you’re so old.*

The next he knew, he was climbing out of sleep, prompted once more by the urge to urinate. No time seemed to have passed, but a look out the windows showed the sky washed with faint light, herald to the dawn. He found the bathroom more easily this time, and foregoing modesty, left the door open while he peed. The chamber music echoed through the hall. While he was washing his hands, he heard mixed with the water’s hiss

another sound, what might have been the squeak of sneakers on the floor outside the bathroom. He shut off the tap and waited, listening.

Nothing. He dried his hands and walked to the kitchen. Another couple of glasses of water, then back to the living room, where the couch was waiting to receive him.

VIII

Breakfast smells (coffee, sausages, toast) and sounds (the stuttering burp of the coffee maker, the sizzle of oil in the pan, the ticking of the toaster) roused him to late morning sunlight. Head complaining at the effort, Carl sat up. It wasn't as if he hadn't seen this coming. At least he'd remembered to hydrate; otherwise, the hangover would have been mortal.

Hunter was waiting in the kitchen, standing at the stove cooking sausages in one pan and scrambled eggs in the another. A gray tracksuit floated around him. Aside from his sunglasses, he showed scant evidence of the previous day's excess. "Hey, Sleeping Beauty," he said. "How're you feeling?"

"About two steps from death," Carl said. "How is it you're even moving around?"

"Please," Hunter said. "You think that's the most I've ever had to drink? I tell you about the time I was in Chechnya, following a squad of Russian *spetsnaz*? Those guys spend all night working their way through a case of vodka, then are on the move at dawn, fighting by breakfast. If you want to run with them, you have to be able to keep up with them."

"I'm amazed your liver survived."

"Yeah, well, I did lay off alcohol for about a month after I came back from that assignment. What do you want to eat? Eggs? Sausage? Both?"

"For the moment, this'll do," Carl said, lifting the mug of coffee he'd poured. "I don't suppose you have any oatmeal."

"Yeah, there's a box of the instant stuff in the cabinet to my left. Apple and cinnamon, I think."

"That'll be fine, thanks."

They sat on high stools at the kitchen island, Carl with his coffee, Hunter with a plate of sausage and eggs. Through the windows, Carl watched a hawk skim the tops of the evergreens. “Actually,” Hunter said through a mouthful of food, “that was among the drunkest I’ve been.”

“No ‘among’ for me.”

“Yeah?”

“I’ve never been what you’d call a heavyweight, but I’ve put away my fair share of booze. Not like that, though.”

A smile broke over Hunter’s face. “Good. I like the idea of our final visit being marked by a memorable event. You’ll always be able to say, ‘The last time I saw Hunter, we drank more Scotch than I ever had before or since.’”

“Couldn’t we have gone out for a nice dinner, instead? Or a game of miniature golf, maybe?”

“Nah. Think of it as being like Vikings on the eve of a big battle, working themselves up for it.”

“We’re fighting a battle today?”

“What would you say if I said yes?”

“I’d say I wish I stayed home, sent you a nice card, instead: ‘So long, nice knowing you.’”

“A card? Really?”

“A nice card. You’d love it. They’d show it off at your funeral.”

“After I was killed in the battle you bailed on.”

“It would be some card,” Carl said. “Speaking of which, are you planning a memorial service?”

“Yeah.” Hunter nodded. “Immediately after I go, there’ll be a small gathering in Burlington, at one of the galleries. Then, in the spring, there’ll be a bigger event down in Brooklyn, a retrospective of my work with remarks by a few of my friends and colleagues. If you’re available…”

Carl’s throat tightened. “Sure.”

“Good. Thank you. I’m just about done writing your speech. I figured we could rehearse it later.”

“What? You don’t trust me to tell the truth?”

“That’s exactly what I’m afraid of.”

“So, what’s the plan for today?”

“Finish your coffee,” Hunter said. “You should probably have your oatmeal, too.”

IX

After breakfast, Hunter led Carl to the guest room, which was on the other side of the study, up a flight of stairs, and along a short hallway. “I’ll see you for lunch,” Hunter said. “I have some dying stuff to attend to.”

“Right,” Carl said.

The room was on the east side of the house, what Carl thought of as its back side. Instead of a wall composed of glass, a pair of regular-sized windows gave a view across an overgrown field behind the house to the tree line. Low hills rolled in the distance. Resisting the temptation of the queen-sized bed, Carl showered in the attached bathroom, dressed, and called home.

“How hungover are you?” Melanie asked.

“It could be worse,” Carl said.

“That bad.”

“Yeah.”

“Did you leave any Scotch for today?”

“Technically, it was today when we finished the second bottle. I think it was, anyway.”

“Wonderful. Well, I’m sure Hunter has more liquor, just in case there’s anything left of your liver. How is he?”

“Honestly, he’s in better shape than I was expecting. Don’t get me wrong: He’s skin and bones, with an emphasis on the bones. But I imagined he’d be confined to bed, too spent to say much; instead, he’s up making scrambled eggs and sausages this morning. As far as I can tell, he’s as sharp as he ever was.”

“He’s led a pretty active life. He must have a lot to draw on.”

“I think you’re right.”

“Has he said anything about his ex? Jill, was it?”

“Gillian, yeah. Not really—only that he hasn’t heard from her. There’s another woman staying here, Annie something. I saw her yesterday on the way in, walking the dog. I haven’t met her, yet.”

“Really.”

“Apparently, she’s a psychic. Hunter says she’s here to help him. I don’t know with what.”

“I’ll avoid the obvious remarks,” Melanie said.

“I thought the same thing, but I’m not sure it’s the case.”

“Either way, Hunter’s a big boy. Anything else going on?”

Carl hesitated, weighing a description of his early morning driveway encounter with the child and the weird animals. Already, though, the event seemed distant, dreamlike, if not a product of the Scotch, then colored by it. He settled for, “Not much. I ran into a couple of coyotes when I went out to the car for my bag.” The instant the words left his mouth, he realized how false they sounded. Even through liquor-clouded lenses, the things he’d seen had not moved like coyotes. He remembered their strange, spread-eagled crawl, their elongated skulls. No, not coyotes, and not cougars, and not anything with which he was familiar.

“Holy crap,” Melanie said. “What did they do?”

“Oh, they prowled back and forth in front of the woods for a minute or two, and ran away.”

“Be careful. It’s more wild up there.”

“Yeah,” Carl said, but he had an obscure feeling it was too late for caution.

X

There wasn’t space for him to practice his morning (now afternoon) *kata* in the guest room, so once he and Melanie had said their good-byes, Carl made his way downstairs. He was considering finding a spot outside, but during the time he had spent in the guest room, clouds had thickened the

sky, obscuring the Adirondacks and releasing torrents of snow. In the kitchen, he stopped to watch the crowns of the red pine swaying this way and that, as if engaged in a vast conversation about the snow accumulating on their branches. Behind him, a voice said, “It’s supposed to last all day.”

He turned, and saw a woman standing on the opposite side of the kitchen island. Late twenties, he guessed, dressed in a white cable-knit sweater and jeans, her chestnut hair pulled back into a ponytail. On the marble in front of her, a number of oversized cards had been arranged in a circle—Tarot cards. The woman was holding the rest of her deck in her left hand. “Sorry,” she said, “I didn’t mean to startle you. I’m Annie.”

“No need to apologize,” Carl said. “I’m Carl. Hunter maybe said I was coming?”

“He did. I saw you on the driveway yesterday.”

“You were walking a dog.”

“Rufus, yes.”

“Where is he? I haven’t seen him at all since I’ve been here.”

“Hunter’s rehoming him with some friends. I took him over there yesterday afternoon.”

“That’s… oddly responsible of him.”

“You aren’t the first person to say that to me.” Annie picked up the card at the top of the circle and returned it to the deck.

“Am I interrupting you? Because if I am, I can get out of your way.”

“It’s all right,” Annie said. “I was done, anyway.”

“I take it from the cards you’re Madame Sosostris.”

“Guilty as charged.”

“What were you doing the reading for? Or can I ask you that?”

“I was—you might say I was checking on Hunter.”

“And?”

“Your friend is very sick.”

Carl nodded. “Yeah. A week or two, he said.”

Annie lifted the last card from the island. Without looking at Carl, she said, “It’s a little less. Days, really. If he passed this afternoon, I wouldn’t be surprised. You shouldn’t be, either.” She placed the deck on the island.

“That’s…” The words were a roundhouse kick to his unprotected head. “I mean, I knew he didn’t have long. It’s why I’m here. But I assumed we’d have a little time together. He’s—he seems fine.”

“Hunter possesses more willpower than anyone I’ve ever encountered. I’m fairly certain that’s what’s keeping him going at this point.”

“He’s always been stubborn.”

“Yes, I can believe it.”

“We met in karate class,” Carl said, crossing to the island. He slid out a stool and seated himself on it. “I don’t know if he’s mentioned this. There were some things he was good at right from the start. Free sparring, in particular: he was fast, and he was ferocious. He would hit you four times before you knew what was happening. The forms, though, the *kata*, were a challenge. He had a hard time remembering the sequences of moves, and then performing them at the proper pace. For some students, this would not have been a big deal. They would do whatever *kata* they were responsible for well enough to earn their next promotion, and that was that. Not Hunter. He wanted his forms to be perfect. Every time he made a mistake, it was back to the beginning, running through the form until he had it right, no matter how long that took. I used to practice with him after class was over. We would stay an extra hour, longer. While we were training, his focus was absolute. Those sessions made me a better martial artist. Without them, I doubt I’d have ended up with my own studio.”

“He told me a version of that story,” Annie said. “In it, he wants to go home, but you insist he keeps working until he does the form properly.”

“Well, there may have been a little of that,” Carl said. “What about you? How did you meet Hunter?”

“On a message board. He had some questions he was looking to have answered, and he reached out to me. We corresponded for about a month, then he invited me up here.”

“Oh.”

“I’m not sleeping with him, if that’s what you’re wondering.”

“No,” Carl said, glancing away. “I mean, it’s none of my business if you are.”

“You’re right,” Annie said, “it isn’t. But I don’t want anything distracting you from what we have to do.”

“Which is?”

“Help him as he leaves this life.”

“That’s why I’m here.”

“I’m not talking about another marathon drinking session.”

“Thank God,” Carl said, and smiled. “It’s been years since Hunter and I discussed these things, but time was, he didn’t have much use for notions of the afterlife. I’m guessing that’s changed.”

“Yes and no,” Hunter said, entering the kitchen. He had changed from his gray tracksuit to a white long-sleeved T-shirt and jeans. His faded blue baseball cap perched on his head.

“Hey,” Carl said.

“You’re ready?” Annie said.

“Getting there,” Hunter said. “First, my friend and I need to discuss a few things.”

“We do?”

“Why don’t you make yourself some lunch? There’s plenty of stuff in the fridge.” Hunter pulled a stool toward him and climbed onto it, adding, “I’m not hungry.”

“All right,” Carl said. “How about you, Annie? You want anything?”

“Thanks, I’m fasting.”

While he was retrieving bread, cold cuts, and mustard from the refrigerator, Carl heard Hunter say, “Well?” and Annie reply, “It’s as good a time as any. You see what’s happening outside.” Hunter said, “I take it you checked the cards.” Annie said, “I did. Let’s put it this way: You’re lucky your friend is here.” Hunter grunted. Annie said, “Do you want me to give you time with your friend?” “It’s all right,” Hunter said, “I don’t imagine this’ll take too long.”

His smoked turkey and Swiss assembled, a glass of milk poured, Carl resumed his place at the island. “So,” he said to Hunter. “What is it you want to talk about?”

“It’s my sister,” Hunter said.

“Which one, Vicky or Heather?”

“Neither,” Hunter said. “Natalie. The dead one.”

XI

“Come again?” Carl said.

“I lied to you,” Hunter said. “All those years ago, when I told you about me dying.”

“Your first death.”

“Yeah. Don’t get me wrong, the drowning part was true. My heart stopped. I was gone. My mother had to resuscitate me. The lie was me saying there was nothing after I died.”

“Okay.”

“I’m just gonna describe what happened,” Hunter said. He swallowed, licked his lips. “Start with me underwater. My vision closing off, contracting to a single point. It was like the reverse of the stories about moving through a bright tunnel. I seemed to be traveling backward along a dark passage, away from the light. Or, could be the light was moving, leaving me behind. It was a little frightening, but mostly, I was sad watching it go. I’m pretty sure the sensation of floating was the last thing I felt.

“And then I was on my hands and knees, gasping. I was no longer in the water. I was back on land. Not the beach, though. My fingers and knees were pressing into thick, gray mud. I was still wearing my swim trunks. I looked up, and saw the mud rising to a line of scrub grass. Overhead, dense gray clouds blocked off the sky. I stood, and glanced behind me. An enormous brown river, so wide its other shore was a distant line, flowed from left to right. Patches of mist hung above its surface, which swirled and eddied with competing currents. Despite that, I had the oddest impression I was watching a gigantic snake, something fit to wrestle Godzilla, sliding to

a destination I didn’t want to know. I turned and headed for the grass. The mud made it slow going; I kept tripping and almost tripping. I wasn’t upset or scared—well, maybe some, at the prospect of a monster snake. What I mean is, I wasn’t especially freaked out at slipping under the waves and opening my eyes next to a river. Could be I was stunned, overwhelmed, but I mostly remember being curious about this place, which didn’t resemble the afterlife I’d learned about in Catholic school. I knew enough Greek mythology to think of the River Styx, except there was no sign of Charon the ferryman, and the rest of the shore was empty.

“As I approached the grass, I saw stands of trees, birches. In their midst was a structure—when you were a kid, did you make forts out of old cardboard boxes? You know, big ones, like the kind an appliance comes in?”

“Sure,” Carl said.

“What was in front of me was the biggest box fort I had ever seen. It was the kind of thing my siblings and I would have fantasized about building. There were boxes of all sizes, some large enough to hold a refrigerator. A low wall of cereal boxes separated a cluster of the biggest boxes from individual boxes scattered around its perimeter. Some of the boxes had pictures on them, the kind of crude figures small children draw, done in mud. Seeing the fort filled me with happiness. This was the kind of afterlife I wanted. Plus, I assumed the fort meant there were other kids here. I didn’t know who, but if they built something like this, I was sure we would get along. I hurried forward.

“As I passed one of the boxes outside the low wall, I saw the word JAIL written on it. From inside, someone whimpered. I stopped beside it. The box was washer- or dryer-sized. I circled it to see if there was an opening in one of its sides, a door to the jail. None. I leaned in close to it and said, ‘Hello?’

“Right away, a pair of voices burst out crying, ‘We’re sorry! We’ll be good! Please let us out!’ One of them started sobbing, the other went on pleading to be released. They both sounded young, four or five.

“‘Hold on,’ I said, ‘I’ll get you out of here.’

“Upset as the kids were, I thought they’d be happy to be released. But the one who was crying cried harder, and the other one shouted, ‘No!’

“‘Why not?’ I said. ‘You guys don’t sound like you’re having much fun.’ I ran my hands over the top of the box, searching for a loose corner to pull on, but the flaps were sealed tight.

“‘No,’ the kid said again. ‘If she finds out, we’ll be in trouble.’

“I said, ‘Aren’t you already in trouble?’

“‘Please,’ the kid said. ‘We have to stay here.’

“‘How come?’ I said. ‘What did you do? Who put you in here?’

“‘The queen,’ the kid said. ‘We made her mad, so we had to go to jail.’

“‘Who’s the queen?’

“The other kid’s sobs had diminished; my question revved them up. ‘She’s *awful*,’ the first kid said. ‘You should probably run away before she sees you.’

“The second kid stopped crying long enough to wail, ‘I don’t wanna be a dog!’

“I didn’t know who this queen was, but if she was ruling over a box fort, I guessed I could handle her. I said, ‘This isn’t fair. You guys shouldn’t be in here.’ Which only provoked more protests and sobs. I crouched, sliding my hands along the base of the box in search of a hole or tear an opening I could work to enlarge. Nothing. When I stood, I saw my sister, Natalie, standing on my left, between the jail and cereal box wall.

“She looked the same as she did in the photographs hanging around the house. In the year since we’d buried her, I had stared at those pictures a lot, afraid that, if I didn’t, I would forget her. Her hair had grown in to what it was before the chemo took it, down well past her shoulders. She was wearing a cardboard crown, a red T-shirt, and jean shorts. She was barefoot. She cocked her head and said, ‘Hunter? What are you doing here?’

“‘Nat!’ I said. Strange as it sounds, I think this was the moment I realized I was dead; I mean, when it really hit me. I ran over and threw my arms around her, the way I never had while she was alive.

“She stiffened. ‘This is my place,’ she said.

“I released her. I said, ‘You’re the one who put those kids in that box?’

“She nodded. ‘I’m the queen,’ she said.

“‘They’re little kids,’ I said. ‘One of them’s crying.’

“Natalie walked to the box and bent over to it. She said, ‘I’m the queen. Isn’t that right?’

“‘Yes!’ the kids shouted. ‘Yes, you’re the queen! Yes!’ The first kid added, ‘Please let us out, Your Majesty. Please. We’ll be good. We’ll do everything you say.’

“‘Come on, Nat,’ I said. ‘Listen to them. They’re really scared.’

“‘They’re fine,’ she said. Leaning on the box with her left hand, she trailed the fingers of her right over the cardboard. She said, ‘They’re going to be my dogs. Aren’t you? You’re going to be my dogs. Aren’t you? Aren’t you?’ She turned the question into a song: *‘Aren’t you, aren’t you, aren’t you?’*

“In response, both kids cried. I mean, they cut loose, with the kind of full-throated abandon kids can tap into. I said, ‘Nat, come on.’

“‘Shhh,’ she said, holding her index finger to her lips.

“The crying continued, until it wasn’t crying anymore, it was laughing, then screaming, the hysterical laughter of someone who’s been overwhelmed by the joke. It sounded too big for the box. The kids started to pound on the walls, shaking it.

“‘Nat!’ I said. ‘Please! Will you let them out?’

“‘Here,’ she said. She straightened, put her hands on top of the box, and pulled the flaps apart. The pounding ceased, but the laughing continued. With a mocking bow that was pure Nat, my sister stepped away. ‘Happy?’

“I ran to the jail, ready to lift one or both of the kids out. The cardboard prison was empty. The laughter seemed to surround me. For a moment, I thought my sister had played an elaborate joke on me, allowing the kids to exit the box while I was distracted by her theatrics. I circled it, but aside from the laughing, there was no sign of them. ‘What’s going on?’ I said. ‘Where are they?’

“Natalie didn’t answer. She gave me this look—her face went blank, except for her eyes, which burned like blowtorches. She said, ‘Shut up,’ and the

laughter died away. ‘You don’t belong here,’ she said to me. ‘This is my place. I’m the queen here.’

“I said, ‘Nat—’

“‘Stop calling me that!’ she screamed. ‘That was my old name. Now I have a new one. I’m Natalya, Queen of the Hungry Dogs.’

“I started to laugh, but her expression stopped me. I decided to shift to big-brother mode, because even in the afterlife, I still had that over her, right? I returned her stare with a frown of my own and said, ‘Listen—’

“Apparently, my sister hadn’t gotten the memo about me still outranking her. She said, ‘No, you listen. You don’t belong here. I don’t want you here. This is my place. I made it. You need to leave.’

“‘I can’t leave,’ I said. ‘I drowned. I can’t go back.’

“‘I don’t care,’ she said. ‘Leave.’

“‘Nat,’ I said.

“‘Queen Natalya.’

“I had forgotten how stubborn—how ornery my little sister could be. I was annoyed, and under that, scared at the prospect of spending the rest of eternity with someone so unreasonably hostile to me. I mean, I was her brother, for God’s sake. Shouldn’t we be sticking together?

“From the way Natalie was acting, the answer to my question was no. I felt my irritation bubbling into anger. ‘Well, Queen Natalya,’ I said, ‘what if I don’t want to leave?’

“‘Then I’ll make you,’ she said.

“‘You and what army?’ I said, a favorite taunt from our childhood.

“‘This one.’ She raised her right hand to her mouth, put her index and ring fingers between her lips, and blew. Her whistle was sharp and clear. Immediately, the laughing returned, but louder, as if it was coming from dozens of throats. I saw movement in a stand of trees to my left, and watched as a pack of animals raised themselves from where they’d been lying on their bellies and sides. I glanced at the other groups of birches, and the same thing was happening in each of them, these animals standing.”

“Animals?” Carl said.

“Man, I don’t know,” Hunter said. “They were on all fours, which made me think they were the Hungry Dogs Nat had referred to. But they didn’t look much like dogs. They were hairless, and tailless, and their heads—there was something wrong with their heads. They were misshapen, no two in the same way. Some were long and knifelike, others squashed flat. This one’s jaw was too big for its mouth, that one’s ears flared like fans. You might have thought they were a child’s drawings, brought to life. Or death, I guess. They were the source of the laughter, each one a voice in the mad chorus. They started in our direction, and they didn’t move like any dogs I’d ever known. They crept along the ground, the way you would if you were sneaking up on someone. Of course I could see them, but I had the sense this didn’t matter. They wanted me to watch them coming closer. I was suddenly conscious of myself in my bathing suit, with no means of defense but my hands and feet, which seemed woefully inadequate for the job. The laughter seemed to draw a line under that fact, to emphasize how defenseless, how vulnerable, I was. I didn’t know if I could die a second time, but I guessed I could be hurt. I turned to Natalie and said, ‘All right, I’m sorry. Maybe there’s someplace else I can go.’

“‘Too late,’ she said, with all the smugness of a gambler holding a winning suit.

“‘Nat,’ I said.

“‘Queen Natalya,’ she said, ‘Sovereign of the Hungry Dogs. Who are going to tear you to shreds.’

“I bolted. There was no point in running any direction but the river, so that was what I did. At my back, I heard Natalie whistle, and the thunder of the dogs’ feet as they leaped into pursuit. My hope was to reach the river, splash in and let its current carry me to safety. Or at least, away from my sister and her animals.

“In the time I’d spent talking to Natalie, however, the distance between her box fort and the muddy shore had expanded to the length of a couple of soccer fields—not so far apart as to place the shore beyond reach, but enough to give the dogs a decent chance of bringing me down. I’d always been a fast runner, faster than anyone else in my grade at school, or two grades ahead of me, for the matter. A glance over my shoulder at the

assembled dogs chasing me spurred my feet to move even quicker across the grass. But the dogs were running on four feet, which had to give them the advantage. By the time I was halfway to the river, the leader was right on my heels, its laughter dropped to a low chuckle. I veered right, left, faked right, trying to do what I could to increase the distance between us. The dog's teeth snapped at me, missed me. My heart was pounding so hard it felt like it was about to burst out of my chest; my lungs were filled with fire. Funny, a small part of me picked up on this and thought, *Wait a minute. You're dead. How can you be getting tired?*

"It didn't matter. I had reached the shore. At the edge of the grass, I threw myself forward in what I intended to be a long jump, but was more my arms pinwheeling, my legs flailing, as if I could swim through the air. I landed off balance, in a half skid, and my feet went out from under me, dumping me on my back, hard. Before I could do anything, the dog was on me. Its snout tapered to a jagged blade. It raised up on its hind legs, and drove the blade into me, right here." Hunter's hand pressed the middle of his shirt.

"Holy shit, did that hurt. I had never experienced that kind of pain before; in comparison, drowning had been almost pleasant. It stunned me, as if I'd been plunged into freezing water, this full-body shock. The dog jerked its head loose from my midsection. Blood splashed my face. I wanted to raise my hands, protect myself from its next strike, but the most I could force my arms to do was tremble madly. The dog prepared to skewer me again. This time, its target was my throat. I shut my eyes.

"And nothing happened. No stabbing pain pierced my neck. I opened my eyes to darkness—no dog, no shore, no river—and then the world rushed at me. I was still on my back, but my mother was above me, her knotted hands pressing my sternum, my older sisters and younger brother leaning in to watch Mom's efforts, my father standing just beyond them, as if afraid he'd jinx Mom if he was too close, too hopeful. After that, it was pretty hectic: the paramedics, the ambulance ride to the hospital, the exams to check my status. I didn't forget what happened to me while I was dead, but I… put it to the side, you could say. There was no doubt in my mind as to its reality. I still hurt where the dog had impaled me. But since this reality didn't align with anything I'd been taught to believe about the life to come, I needed

time to process it. I can't remember: Did I ever tell you about my mom asking me if I'd seen Natalie?"

"You did," Carl said. "You told her she was happy, surrounded by glowing light."

"Yeah," Hunter said, "because how could I say her daughter was ruler of her own little hell?"

"Is that what you think it was?"

"Not exactly," Hunter said, "but not too far off."

"So, wait," Carl said. "What about the whole 'I died and there was nothing' bit? Not to put too fine a point on it, but for as long as I've known you, you've been pretty insistent about that."

"Like I said, I lied. Or, not exactly. By the time you heard the story of my first death, I pretty much believed what I was saying. Or I believed I believed it. I don't know. In my late teens, I went through a phase where I became obsessed with near-death experiences. You know, rising out of your body, moving along a tunnel of light, being greeted by all your loved ones. I read every account I could lay my hands on, searching for a narrative that matched up with what I'd been through. I couldn't find one. I moved on to scientific studies of near-death phenomena, and learned that there were biochemical explanations for all of it. The tunnel of light was caused by the firing of certain neurons as your eyes shut down. The vision of your loved ones was a last-minute effort by your brain to fool itself about what it was undergoing, a final delusion. It made a sense I couldn't argue with. I had always been a creative kid; my brain had just come up with a more elaborate fantasy. Yes, it had felt real at the time, but a lot of things had seemed real to me when I was a kid. I used to be very religious; I'm sure I must have told you."

Carl shook his head. "You didn't."

"Oh yeah. Altar boy, morning and evening prayers, Bible study, the works. My parents had this series of books, *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, big, oversized volumes with gold covers, and I would slide one out from the bookcase and sit leafing through it. I didn't just believe in Catholicism intellectually, I felt it viscerally. Jesus, Mary, the saints were these living presences I swore I could sense, as was the Devil. By the time I was a

teenager, though, my faith had started to waver, mainly because I discovered girls, or maybe I should say, they discovered me. Either way, I knew all of the Church's prohibitions against anything other than the most chaste kissing, but when Marcie Roy unhooked her bra, all of that went out the window. I was smart enough to be able to rationalize what we were doing, but I also recognized my mental gymnastics for what they were, a type of bad faith, believing my own bullshit, and this revelation was the first crack in the wall. Considering how devout I had been, my belief crumbled remarkably fast, undermined by good old sex.

"The point is, if I had been wrong about religion, which had been at the center of my life, then the chances seemed petty good I had been mistaken about my post-death encounter with Natalie. If there was a difference between the two, it was that what I'd been through with my sister and her dogs retained the vividness of actual experience. I told myself it was due to the extremity of the situation which had produced it. Let's face it, you're probably thinking something along those lines right now, aren't you?"

"You were young," Carl said, "and it was a horrendous event. It wouldn't be a surprise if your mind tried to protect you from it. Although…"

"What?"

"If it were purely a matter of distracting you from your end, you would think the fantasy would have been more pleasant, less threatening. You go into the light, you meet your sister, and that's all, folks. This is way outside my area of expertise, though, so there could very well be another explanation I'm not aware of."

"Like residual guilt over the death of my sister."

"I suppose. If what we're talking about is some kind of defense mechanism, I'm not sure that works."

"You're right," Hunter said, "it doesn't. I want to say it took me a long time to reach the same conclusion, but I knew, on some level, I knew all along. I couldn't admit it, was all."

"What changed? The cancer?"

"Before that," Hunter said. "About six years ago, I saw Natalie again. I was back in Afghanistan, Kabul, to shoot a piece on the rise of heroin addiction

there. I was working with a journalist from the *Guardian*, Janet Singh, and she had been told about a spot under one of the local bridges where the addicts gathered. We took a taxi to the place, and sure enough, there were all these men sheltering under a structure that might have gone back to the Soviets. This was in the middle of winter, January, and it was freezing. Janet found someone to talk to, a young guy who had the worn-out look long-term users get. He had a frankness I associate with certain kind of addict; it's like their drug use has reduced everything in their lives to the essentials, which is maybe not so strange.

"Anyway, we asked the guy the usual questions. How did you start using? How did it affect your relationship with your family? Is the drug hard to come by? Are you afraid of the police? My Pashto isn't very good, but it didn't need to be. The guy gave the same answers you get from addicts the world over. Until it came to his dealings with the cops, when he said something that caught my attention. 'There are good cops and bad cops,' he said, 'but the men are more worried about the little girl.'

"'The little girl?' Janet said.

"'Yeah,' the guy said. For about the last week, a girl had been showing up among them. It wasn't unusual for there to be kids under the bridge, but this girl dressed like a westerner, in a red T-shirt and shorts. Taking her for the child of an aid worker or a journalist, one of the older men tried to shoo her away. In return, she did something to him.

"'Did something?' Janet said. 'What? What did she do?'

"The guy became embarrassed, looked at his shoes. 'She put her finger to his forehead,' he said, 'and the old man fell down in a fit. His eyes rolled back in his head; foam came out of his mouth. At the end of it, he was dead. Since then, everyone avoided her.'

"Janet took the story for a variety of collective hallucination, which is the rational interpretation. I hadn't thought about what happened after I drowned for I can't tell you how long—not consciously, anyway—but right away, I was back beside the box fort. It was as if I'd been punched in the solar plexus. All the air rushed out of me. I bent over, hands on my knees. Janet noticed, asked if I was okay. I shook my head. Hard as it was to speak, I asked the guy if the girl was wearing anything on her hair. I didn't

know the word for crown, so I swirled one hand around my head. His eyes grew large, and he nodded, said she had on a *taaj* like a child would make. ‘Who is she?’ he wanted to know.

“I couldn’t think how to answer him. Janet wanted to know what was going on. I started to say, ‘Nothing,’ but it was obvious that wasn’t true. Did I mention I’d been in the country for a week? I didn’t, did I? You could guess, though. I looked up at the guy, and standing ten feet behind him, there she was: Queen Natalya, Ruler of the Hungry Dogs, my dead sister. She hadn’t changed much since I’d seen her last, four decades earlier. She glared at me with hatred pure and freezing as an Arctic gale. I panicked, told Janet we had to leave, apologized to the guy we were interviewing, dug in my pocket for some cash to press into his hand. I was terrified Janet was going to notice the girl in the red T-shirt and jean shorts, wearing the cardboard crown, which of course she did while I was attempting to hustle her from under the bridge. The addict had already turned and seen Natalie, and he leaped back the way he might have if he’d seen a cobra raised to strike. ‘Who is she?’ he asked. ‘You know that little girl?’ Janet said. I told the guy to steer clear of her. I didn’t know the word for ghost, so I settled for calling her bad. Janet said, ‘How is this child bad?’ She was trying to step around me, to get to Natalie, who was radiating malice, who was radioactive with it. ‘Please,’ I was saying, ‘we need to go. We can’t stay here.’ But Janet was having none of it. ‘We have to find out what this girl is doing here,’ she said. ‘No, we don’t,’ I said. While we were arguing, Natalie turned and ran the other way, out from beneath the bridge. Everyone gave her plenty of room. Janet pushed me aside and set out after her.”

“What did you do?” Carl said.

“I walked to where the cab was waiting, got in, and returned to the hotel, where I sat at the bar consuming more alcohol than I had in years. This wasn’t convivial excess; this was shot after shot of overpriced vodka to numb the memory of what I’d seen. Eventually, Janet showed up. She’d chased Natalie into a maze of alleys where she’d lost her. She was tired, and pissed, and wanted answers I was too drunk to give her. Let’s face it, though: had I been sober, I doubt I would have told her the truth, either. I was deeply afraid, in a way I’d never been. Scratch that. The fear—the absolute *dread* hollowing me was what I’d experienced as a kid, when I

worried about Hell. The joys of religion. Once you know about something like that, you start to wonder if you might wind up there. It leaves you with the sensation of being horribly exposed, as if your skin is made out of glass and everything you are is on display. It did for me, anyway. Part of an overdeveloped superego, I thought when I left the Church. Sitting at the bar, I felt all the old fear, vulnerable in a way I hadn't standing across a tent from a Sunni chief pointing his .44 magnum at me. I finally told my friend I'd freaked out because the girl we'd seen looked exactly like my long-dead sister, which had triggered all kinds of emotions I wasn't prepared for. If you're going to lie, keep it as close to the truth as you can, right? Janet wasn't satisfied. We'd been in enough high stress situations for her to know I didn't lose my shit, not like that. But she let the matter drop, for which I was grateful. It was the last time we worked together, though. Two days later, I left Kabul on the first flight I could snag. I spent the intervening time firmly ensconced at the bar.

"So that was weird," Hunter said, "but maybe it was an isolated incident, right?" He shook his head. "Nope. On and off since then, Natalie has appeared to me. While I was shooting wildfires in the hills above LA, she was visible between a pair of flaming trees. In eastern Ukraine, she was in the middle of a group of rebels creeping through high grass. I saw her on the roof of a burned-out car on a side street in Aleppo. Always, she wore the same, hate-filled expression.

"My most recent encounter came the week following my cancer diagnosis. I decided I wanted to drive down to the Jersey Shore, revisit the site of my first death. Morbid, perhaps, but there you have it. Do you know, in the years since, I hadn't been back to that beach once? Not so surprising, I guess.

"With traffic, it was a ten-hour drive. I went alone, didn't want to bring Jill with me. I suppose that was a sign the marriage was on its way out. I left at breakfast, arrived in the early evening. The town had taken a beating during Sandy: There were still gaps where beach houses had stood. I had an idea I would find a motel room, spend a couple of days on the shore. I stopped at a deli, bought an Italian combo hero and a Coke. Being there might have been all kinds of traumatic, but parking on a side street, walking toward the beach, I was kind of exhilarated. The sky was hung with low puffy clouds

the sun was filling with red and gold light on its way to the horizon. I strolled onto the beach, which was mostly empty, sat down halfway to the ocean, and ate my dinner while the waves rolled in. If there was one place I was certain of encountering Natalie, this was it, ground zero for our first meeting. Or, not first, but you know what I mean. Our first posthumous run-in. I wouldn't go so far as to say I wasn't concerned about it, but I was less worried than you would have anticipated. Maybe what I needed to do, I thought, was to confront my sister here, where everything had started. Call it a version of taking the fight to the enemy.

"All my bravado went straight out the window when I saw her running toward me. She burst from the waves, already moving full-tilt, her arms out low to either side, her fingers curved into claws. Her mouth was open in a scream that made me nearly piss myself. Where the ocean foamed behind her—I don't know how to describe this—it was full of the Hungry Dogs, I couldn't say how many of them, rising from the water and falling back into it, as if they were trying and failing to gain form. Natalie's bare feet pounded the sand. Her clothes were dry, as was the cardboard crown. I'm not sure I can convey how frightening it was. It—she had lost none of the intensity, the single-mindedness kids have, and that we spend our adult lives attempting to recover. She didn't hate: She was hate. She was no bigger than she'd ever been, but her screaming surrounded her, made her part of something enormous and terrifying. I swore I could hear the dogs laughing in the waves.

"I didn't waste any time. I left my sandwich wrapper and bottle where they were and fled for the car, which sounds easier than it was. My feet kept threatening to slip from underneath me and dump me on my ass. At my back, Natalie's scream expanded. Legs burning, I reached the pavement. Natalie's scream was deafening; it vibrated right through the center of me. I glanced over my shoulder, saw her a dozen steps away. Whether I was going to reach the car before she reached me was looking like a close thing. Thank God for keyless entry; I jammed my hand in my pocket, found the remote, and pressed the unlock button. My shirt jumped as Natalie swiped at it, missed. As we drew even with the car, I sped up, running past the driver's side door and then dodging left, around the trunk, to the passenger's side. It was the kind of trick I used to play on her when we

were growing up, and it worked now, as it had worked then. I flung open the passenger's door, threw myself into the car, and hauled the door shut, locking it.

"Natalie was furious. She circled the car three times, and I swear, her scream was as loud inside the car as it had been outside. My heart was pounding, my head swimming. How ironic would it be for me to die from a heart attack here and now? I forced myself to move. If Natalie gained entry to the car, I had no plan. I sidled into the driver's seat, started the engine. My sister came to a halt directly in front of me and stood there, screaming. I'll admit, I considered shifting into drive and stepping on the gas."

"Why didn't you?" Carl said.

"Because whatever she had become, she still looked like my little sister. I reversed away from her, and burned rubber out of there. Natalie didn't pursue me, but her screams rang in my ears the entire way home."

XII

"I assume this is when Hunter called you," Carl said to Annie.

"Eventually," Hunter said. "For the first twenty-four hours after I pulled into the driveway, I was certain Natalie was on her way. Any minute now, I was going to look out the window and see her springing up the front steps. I didn't, but I didn't sleep all that much, either. I started chemo a couple of days later. My oncologist had recommended aggressive treatment as my only hope. As I believe I may have said, it kicked my ass. I was terribly afraid Natalie would appear while I was sitting on one of the hospital's comfy chairs, IV'd to the stuff that was nuking my body in hopes of frying the cancer first. I was tense, irritable. Jill was gone from the house a lot, which I can't say I blame her for.

"Finally, I decided I had to start talking to people about Natalie. I don't mean psychologists. I already had a decent idea of the interpretation they would offer me. My original experience was a fantasy constructed ad-hoc by my mind to fool itself into believing it wasn't facing extinction. Its ambiguous nature owed itself to unresolved guilt over my sister's death. My recent visions of her were the result of decades of poorly treated PTSD brought about by the accumulated stress of the places I'd covered. What

had happened was a full-blown psychotic incident, precipitated by my recent diagnosis and its poor prognosis. That sound on target?”

“I’m not a shrink, but yeah, I guess so.”

“The people I was interested in were the ones who would take my story at face value. I started with the local Catholic priest. Faith of our fathers and all that. He was followed by Episcopalian, Lutheran, Greek Orthodox, Methodist, Presbyterian, Baptist, and Unitarian clergy, after which, I moved to conservative and reformed Judaism, then Zen Buddhism and Tibetan Buddhism. I didn’t have much luck with any of them. Assuming they didn’t think I was playing some kind of weird joke on them, most of the men and women I spoke to opted for the psychological view. The Episcopalian and Unitarian were more flexible; each of them suggested I might have encountered a Hell that was adapted to me, specifically. The Tibetan Buddhist raised the possibility that what I took for my sister was a kind of wrathful god, a figure who appears to you once you’re dead to frighten you toward the right path. There was no doubt Natalie had scared me, but none of our meetings had driven me to enlightenment. And I couldn’t understand why my younger self would have merited a trip to Hell, and why my little sister would have been waiting for me there. No, none of it was especially helpful at explaining the story I told. I went online, hung out on all sorts of out-of-the-way message boards. This was how I found Annie.” Hunter nodded at her. “There was this woman on one of them. She was being—I guess you would call it harassed by what she thought was her brother, until she found out he was out of the country, on a month-long trip to New Zealand. This… figure was making all kinds of weird shit happen to her. Annie wrote a long response to the woman’s post which made me think she might be the person for me to talk to. I messaged her, sketched out the parameters of my situation, and asked if she had any insight into it. She replied straight away, said she’d do some research and let me know in a day or two. Which she did.

“And to cut to the chase, here we are.”

“Here we are,” Carl said. He stood from the kitchen island, carried his dish and glass to the sink. “If one of you could tell me exactly where here is, that would be helpful. Specifically, what is it you’re planning, and why do you want me to be part of it? I mean, I assume that’s the point of all this, to

persuade me to assist in your—are you going to perform an exorcism? some kind of casting out of the evil spirit?"

"No," Hunter said. "All I need is for you to walk with me for a little while."

"This is one of those it's-more-complicated-than-it-sounds deals, isn't it?"

"No," Hunter said. "Or yes. Somewhat. Annie, feel free to jump in."

"Hunter's telling you the truth," Annie said. While Hunter had been telling his stories, she had quietly removed six Tarot cards from the deck, and placed them at what appeared to be the points of a hexagon. "He has to cross dangerous terrain. Having a friend with him, especially one he's known for so long, will help."

"Dangerous?"

"She means Natalie's turf."

"The box fort place?"

"Her kingdom, yeah. With the Hungry Dogs."

"I don't think I understand."

"Hunter's become entangled with his sister's domain," Annie said, "to an extent that will make it difficult for him not to be caught there. I've worked out a map to guide him through; however, once he sets foot in it, Natalie is going to do what she can to keep him with her."

"You want me to fight your sister for you?" Carl said.

"I'll deal with Natalie," Hunter said. "It's the dogs I'm worried about."

"I'm protecting you from them? I'm still not sure what they are."

"They're souls," Annie said. "Of children, as far as I can tell. Drawn into Natalie's sphere and warped by her."

"Jesus," Carl said. "What are we talking about? I thought she was a ghost."

"Imagine," Annie said, "that when you die, you have to cross from the land of the living"—she placed her index finger on the card at the top of the hexagon and slid the digit to the card at the bottom—"to the land of the dead. Let's not worry about that place. What concerns us"—she moved her finger to the center of the space—"is what lies between."

“Isn’t that supposed to be a tunnel of light?”

“Or the river Styx, or a Valkyrie leaning to grab you from her winged horse, or—you understand. It’s reactive. You’re likely to encounter whatever you expect to. The majority of those who enter it succeed in reaching the other side. A few turn back, try to return to this life, which generally doesn’t go well.”

“Ghosts.”

Annie nodded. “Among other things. A few souls become lost in this middle ground. They see somewhere they want to remain, so they do. Call it Limbo, albeit, of a highly personalized kind. There, the dead change, go feral.”

“Hunter’s sister is a feral ghost?”

“Yes, and from everything he’s described, she’s a powerful one. She’s learned how to employ the landscape’s reflective quality to alter other souls.”

“But she’s a kid—was a kid.”

“You have children?”

“Two, daughters.”

“Then you have direct knowledge of a child’s creativity and will power. What do you suppose would happen if you placed a particularly bright and strong-willed child in a place where those qualities would have an immediate effect on her surroundings?”

“Okay,” Carl said, “you have a point. But what are the other kids doing there to begin with? I’m guessing there’s some kind of connection among family members, which would explain why Hunter was drawn to the place. Those kids, though, the ones Natalie’s transformed, what brought them to her? Shouldn’t they have been traveling their own paths?”

“Most do. As I said, it’s possible to lose your way, and once that happens, to wander into someplace like Natalie’s domain. There, you’re liable to her influence.”

“To what end? Why would she do all this, change other kids into monsters, chase after Hunter?”

“Boredom,” Annie said. She began to collect the Tarot cards in front of her. “Eternity is long. She wants Hunter because he escaped from her, because he escaped back to life. Think of a frustrated child. I would guess she’s been searching for a way to extend her pursuit of him ever since that afternoon. How she accomplished it, I’m not sure. Single-minded persistence, obviously, but combined with some quality of the places Hunter went which allowed her to push through into them. Possibly the connection to trauma, to pain, suffering. Those kinds of extreme states weaken the barrier between our world and Limbo.”

“If she’s this strong, why not grab him, drag him off to her kingdom?”

“I don’t know,” Annie said. “To do something like that requires tremendous power and knowledge. Natalie has the one, but may not have the other. Or she may know he’s dying, and have decided it’s easier to wait.”

“So you kick off,” Carl said to Hunter, “and Natalie’s waiting to turn you over to her dogs for a rawhide bone. I understand you have Annie’s map through Limbo, but I don’t see how you ever get to use it.”

“Because we’re cheating,” Hunter said. He doffed his baseball cap and set it on the kitchen island, grabbed the bottom of his T-shirt and pulled it over his head. In the wintry light, his chest and arms were pale, the skin tight against the bone, painful to look at. His flesh was covered in designs executed in pale red ink, what might have been a child’s approximation of letters, except the longer Carl studied them, the more they grew to resemble not so much letters as animals, fantastic creatures whose outlines stirred the hairs on his arms. He said, “What… ?”

“Camouflage,” Hunter said. “It won’t hide me from Natalie, but it should make it harder for the dogs to track me.” He folded the T-shirt, placed it beside the baseball cap.

“Should,” Carl said.

“Hey, none of this is the kind of thing there are manuals for. We’re doing the best we can.”

“What about me? Where’s my camouflage?”

“You don’t need any.” Hunter unbuttoned and unzipped his jeans, and lowered them. Underneath, he was naked, his emaciated skin a canvas for

more of the strange characters.

"Dude," Carl said.

"Our theory," Annie said, "is that Natalie and the dogs will be focused on Hunter. The sigils will throw the dogs off Hunter, while your presence will confuse them further."

"A living guy in Limbo is not something they've seen," Hunter said. He folded his jeans, set them on top of the T-shirt.

"Are you saying they can't hurt me?"

"No," Annie said.

"You're the living weapon, remember?"

"Seriously? I run a small dojo in small city in the Hudson Valley. Most of my students are under ten. Half my classes I spend in fun activities so the kids won't get bored."

"Don't sell yourself short."

"You want to know the last time I was in a fight? Not a sparring match, but an actual fight? I was thirteen, and the other kid cleaned my clock. And this was a human being, not some kind of monster."

"All right," Hunter said, "how about, you're all I've got?"

"That's hardly a ringing endorsement. What happened to your *spetsnaz* buddies?"

"Dead," Hunter said, "except for the one who's in Syria."

"Son of a bitch," Carl said. "How am I even supposed to accompany you?"

"At the moment," Annie said, "the next world is very close. When you're talking about this kind of geography, the places move in relation to you. Just over the border, Natalie and her dogs are waiting. She's so concentrated on Hunter, she won't notice if I slide our place and hers into conjunction."

"You can do that?"

"Under normal circumstances, no. You need knowledge and power, remember? I have plenty of the former, but nowhere near enough of the latter. Natalie has power to spare, however, and I've worked out how to siphon off a sufficient amount to put my knowledge to use."

“Annie’s gonna drop us behind enemy lines,” Hunter said, “so to speak. We’ll have a head start on our pursuers; plus, we’ll be that much closer to our destination.”

“Your destination,” Carl said. “I still have to return from this excursion. Which I’m going to do how?”

“Once Hunter has reached the other side of Natalie’s domain, I should know. I’ll release the spell holding the worlds together, and you should be carried back here.”

“There’s a hell of a lot of maybe to this plan.”

“Yeah,” Hunter said, “there is.”

Carl sighed. “It amazes me that I’m having this conversation.”

“You’ve always been pretty gullible.”

“Very nice,” Carl said. “Okay. When is all of this supposed to happen? Do you know how much longer you have?”

“Until about two hours ago,” Hunter said.

Snow filled the kitchen, swirling around the three of them.

XIII

“What do you mean?” Carl said. “You’re… ?” Unsaid, the word lay leaden on his tongue. Heavy, wet snowflakes pattered his face. The temperature was plunging.

“Don’t worry about it,” Hunter said. He crossed to Carl, grabbed his left shoulder with a hand that felt as solid as it ever had. Snow stuck to his bare skin; his breath misted the air. A mix of emotions, grief, incredulity, anger, surged in Carl’s chest, making him sway as if still drunk. His eyes moistened, dissolving the snow clinging to his lashes.

“We’re on the clock,” Annie said. She had fanned the Tarot deck on the marble in front of her and was using both hands to push certain cards out of it. Snowflakes eddied about her, condensing into clouds that rushed away from her.

Hunter relaxed his grip on Carl. “Madame Sosostris,” he said, “thank you. I couldn’t have done this alone.”

Without looking up from the cards, Annie said, “You’re right.”

“Come on,” Hunter said, moving toward the hallway to the living room.

“One moment,” Carl said. He wiped his eyes. A magnetic strip on the wall to the left of the sink held a series of rubber-handled knives hung points down in ascending order of size. He selected the second largest, just shy of the butcher knife at the end, and tugged it loose.

From the doorway, Hunter said, “Ready?”

“No,” Carl said, testing the knife’s weight, its balance.

“Excellent.”

In the hall, the snow thickened, the flakes becoming smaller and denser, almost ice pellets. They rattled against the windows, clattered on the wall, stung Carl’s face and hands. Raising his left hand to shield his eyes, his right ready with the knife, he said to Hunter’s back, “This already sucks.”

“Yeah, well, try doing it naked.”

“About that: Couldn’t you have found a way to do this clothed?”

“Sorry. I didn’t realize you’d be so intimidated.”

“Intimidating is not the word I’d use for your scrawny ass.”

Carl glanced at the windows, but the storm outside had reduced the view to driving snow. At his feet, mist carpeted the floor, rising to his knees as he moved forward. “I feel like we should be having some kind of heartfelt conversation,” he said. Icy snow clung to his hair, his ears, the back of his neck.

“What is it you want to talk about?”

“I don’t know. Did it hurt? Dying?”

“I took some pills,” Hunter said. “I went to sleep. At the end, I panicked a little, thought, ‘Oh my God, what am I doing? What if all of this is bullshit, and I’m killing myself because of it?’ But it was already too late; the only thing I could do was trust the plan Annie and I had come up with.”

“How about now?”

“How do I feel? Weird. Half of me is elated. It’s like, it worked! Here I am! The other half of me is scared shitless. I’ve deliberately made myself vulnerable to my sister and the Hungry Dogs. Those things, man…”

“I know.”

“What do you mean?” Hunter slowed, cast a glance over his shoulder.

“I saw them,” Carl said. “Last night. Or technically, I guess it was this morning. When I went out to the car for my bag. There were a couple of animals at the edge of the woods. I couldn’t see them very well. Even with the garage lights, it was pretty foggy. I thought they might be coyotes, except they didn’t move like any coyote I’ve ever seen.”

“Sounds like them.”

“I think I saw your sister, too. There was a kid dressed in a red T-shirt and shorts.”

“She probably wanted to check you out.”

“That’s reassuring.”

At the end of the hall, a framed eight-by-ten photograph hung. Hunter paused to study it, giving Carl time to join him. One of his better-known efforts, Hunter had taken it in the aftermath of Katrina’s inundation of New Orleans. It showed a man and woman waist deep in water, straining to hold on to a rowboat crowded by four frightened children, a pair of dogs, and an assortment of worldly goods, including a cooler, a microwave, and a television weighing down one corner of the boat. Water foamed around the hull, the man appeared to be on the verge of losing his grip, the woman’s face was contorted with effort, two children were crying, one of the dogs was attempting to scramble over the side. The photo was one of those iconic images of the disaster, part of the visual library news directors and documentary filmmakers went to for their pieces on the storm. Now, every last one of the figures in it had been replaced by Natalie, including the dogs. She looked on with concern at her struggling attempt to fight the current threatening to carry her away. Tongue lolling, she leaned against herself, who wrapped her arms around her tightly, eyes closed.

“Well,” Carl said.

“Yeah,” Hunter said.

As they emerged into the living room, the snow lost its ferocity. Carl lowered his hand. The space was full of trees, red pine mixing with birch, rooted in the hardwood floor. Couches and chairs scattered among them.

The mist reached above his and Hunter's heads. He said, "I love what you've done with the place."

"I wasn't sure," Hunter said.

"No, it totally works," Carl said. "Gives a real, 'You're going to suffer a horrifying death here' vibe."

"Exactly what I was aiming for."

They advanced quickly, Hunter aiming for a group of three pines beside a recliner. About four feet up, the trunk of the middle tree had been scored with a series of short, shallow cuts, forming a symbol somewhere between a diamond and an eye. Hunter gestured at the mark. "All right. That's one of the runes Annie's using to stitch everything together. We can use them to guide us. More importantly, you can follow them out of here."

"I thought I was supposed to be whooshed to safety."

"That's the plan, but I figure we should have a backup."

"Can't argue with that."

In the middle distance, a larger pine was faintly visible. Skirting an end table, Hunter set off toward it. The snow had returned to large, damp flakes, which dropped around them in slow, lazy motions. To the left, a shape appeared: a brown box, big enough to hold a washing machine. On the side facing them was written HUNTER in childish letters. "Jesus," Carl said. Hunter did not comment.

The same blend of diamond and eye stared at them from the second tree's bark. Hunter brushed it with his fingertips. "Okay," he said. "The next part is tricky. We have to walk in a more or less straight line until we come to a tree that's forked at the base. It shouldn't be too far, but distances can be tricky, here. The important thing is to maintain our direction."

Carl nodded. He switched the knife to his left hand, flexed the fingers of his right. "After you."

Two steps from the tree, the mist congealed, rendering Hunter dim, insubstantial. In the dim light, the red figures written on his skin appeared clearer, as if the mist were a lens bringing them into sharper focus. Carl had the momentary impression the symbols were carrying Hunter, a mix of strange creatures and unfamiliar characters taking him through the mist.

“You with me?” he said. The mist muffled his voice, making him sound farther away.

“Yes, sadly.”

First on the left, and then the right, Carl heard the click of claws on hardwood. They were being paced, by several animals, from the sound of it. Glances to either side showed only mist. He returned the knife to his right hand. “Hey,” he said.

“I know,” Hunter said. “Nothing to do but keep going.”

Now the claws were behind them, as well. The skin between Carl’s shoulders tingled. He said, “I thought you were supposed to be camouflaged.”

“Who says it’s me they’re tracking?”

“Great.”

Another box, this one tall and narrow, loomed directly in front of them. “Shit,” Hunter said. HUNTER’S FRIEND was scrawled on it. Carl’s mouth went dry. He approached the box, reached out his hand to touch the words. The mud in which they were written was still damp. He wiped his fingers on his jeans. He felt his distance from Melanie, the girls, from everything he knew, a gap vast and profound. The claws herding them slowed but did not stop. Cold filled him, his interior weather mirroring the exterior conditions. “Oh,” he said, “I am fucked.”

“Not yet, you’re not,” Hunter said. He stepped closer to Carl, caught his elbow. “Come on.” Carl nodded, allowed Hunter to tug him around the obstacle.

On the other side of the box, the dogs struck. To the right, claws scrabbled on the floor. Raising his left hand to guard, dropping his right to stab, Carl pivoted at the sound. As he did, another set of claws raced at him from the rear. He half turned in that direction, and the first dog smashed into his left knee. The pain was instant, overwhelming, taking him from his feet. Although he landed on his elbows, adding injury to injury, he held on to the knife. With the shock broadcasting from his leg, it was the most he could do. His assailant continued into the mist, as did the decoy, passing close enough for him to feel the drum of its paws through the wood. In this

position, he was horribly defenseless, his back open to the teeth of the next attacker, but he could not move, could not draw sufficient breath to voice the curses streaming through his head: *Fucking fuck oh motherfucker fuck me you fucker fuck.*

Laughter burst around him, a shrieking choir whose volume suggested it issued from a hundred throats. Had it not been for the hurt, his nerves would have glowed with fear. As it was, he registered the approximate number voicing their delirium and added one more curse to his mental litany: *Shit.*

Hunter crouched beside him. “What happened?”

“My knee,” Carl said, nodding at it.

He felt Hunter’s hands on his leg. “No sign of a bite or cut.”

“No. Hit it with their head.”

“Right,” Hunter said. He caught Carl under the armpits, started to lift. “Let’s go. You don’t want to stay here.”

Of course he was right. With Hunter’s help, Carl pushed himself to standing. His knee protested, but took his weight.

“You need to lean on me?” Hunter said.

“I think I can manage.”

Accompanied by the laughter, and under it, the snicker of claws on wood, the two of them resumed their trek. The snow had tapered to scattered flakes, which circled them like moths. Cold numbed Carl’s fingers, ears, face, made his nose run. He passed the knife back and forth between his hands, tucking whichever hand was free under the opposite armpit to warm it. At least the movement helped the pain radiating from his knee, allowing him to breathe more freely. But as the hurt ebbed, a tide of dread pushed in to take its place. A solid shot from one of those things and he was left helpless. How was he supposed to handle the laughing horde trailing them?

A red pine materialized in the mist, split at the foot into a pair of thick trunks whose lower branches were barkless, dead. On the trunk to their left, Carl recognized the diamond/eye symbol. The right fork was inscribed with the figure, too, but this one was surrounded by a tall rectangle, above and below which were cut short horizontal lines. Hunter stood beside the left

trunk and pointed into the mist at about a forty-five degree angle from where they were standing. “This way,” he said, and set off in the new direction.

At first, Carl thought it was his imagination, or an acoustic trick played by the moisture around them, but as they left the latest signpost behind, so did the laughter diminish in intensity. He wouldn’t have sworn to it, but it seemed to be moving away from them. For a brief time, individual yips and screams continued to sound perilously close, and then the only noise was his and Hunter’s feet on the floor. He said, “Is this the part where I say it’s too quiet?”

“Another one of Annie’s tricks,” Hunter said. “Won’t last forever, but it’ll allow us to put some room between us and the dogs.”

The mist was thinning, trees coalescing to either side. Hunter veered slightly to the right, to a young pine whose slender length bore the familiar mark. At the tree, he turned ninety degrees to the left and continued walking. “You know,” Carl said, “I’m not sure I’m going to be able to remember this route.”

“Relax,” Hunter said. “You won’t have to, remember?”

“And if something goes wrong? What happened to the contingency plan?”

“Nothing’s going to go wrong,” Hunter said. “We made it this far, didn’t we? Jesus, when did you become such a worrywart?”

“Two kids and one business ago.”

“It’s fine. Everything’s fine. Why do you have to be like this?”

“Because I’m the one looking at a future as the chew toy of the damned.”

On their left, a collection of geometric silhouettes, smaller rectangles and larger squares, appeared through the mist. Another couple of steps, and the shapes resolved into a series of shoeboxes stood on end, forming a half circle before a pair of square boxes. Beyond this arrangement, further boxes were visible, clusters of low boxes interspersed in front of a line of bigger boxes, which were joined in what might have been a tunnel whose ends continued into the mist. Behind the tunnel, assorted boxes stacked three, four, and even five high formed precarious towers. Here and there, a birch rose in the midst of the constructions. Clearly, this was the box fort of

Hunter's story, but it had grown from fort to metropolis, its full dimensions obscured by the mist. There appeared to be writing on some of the boxes, but between the distance and the mist, Carl could not read any of it. He said, "Wow."

"Natalie was never one for half measures."

"I can't help thinking how cool this looks. Is that crazy?"

"You have to respect her dedication."

They proceeded within sight of the cardboard city for ten minutes, more, past long, narrow boxes balanced to form a succession of archways, past a massive collection of coffee-mug-sized boxes meticulously layered into a ziggurat whose flat top stood as high as Carl's head, past tiny jewelry boxes arranged upon the floor in great spirals and stars. Mixed with his admiration and dread, Carl was aware of a new emotion, pity, for a child whiling away the endless days of her afterlife in yet another game. "Do you suppose," he said, "your sister has anyone else with her? Not the dogs, I mean another person."

Hunter shrugged. "My previous trip, she was the only one I saw. It's hard for me to imagine her tolerating another kid for very long. If an adult wandered into this place, I expect she'd consider them a threat to her authority."

"She must be lonely, though."

"Yeah, well, she's kept herself busy, hasn't she?" Anxiety strained Hunter's words.

"Is it much further?"

As if in answer, Carl saw a trio of red pines ahead. The trees on the right and in the center bore Madame Sosotris's symbol. Hunter strode between them. Carl followed. "We're most of the way there," Hunter said.

"That's good. Right?"

Instead of replying, Hunter stopped. Carl was on the verge of asking him what was wrong, when he saw the girl standing directly in front of them, a large animal behind her.

Natalie Kang might have been any nine- or ten-year-old entering an early growth spurt, all long skinny arms and legs. Her thick black hair reached

past her waist and was in need of a brush. She was barefoot, wearing denim shorts and a red long-sleeved T-shirt. A cardboard crown circled her hair. Looking at her there in front of them, Carl was reminded of his daughters at that age, brimming with energy, possessed of surprising depths of melancholy and reflection, as well as titanic mirth. She was much smaller than he remembered, which was a ridiculous observation, because he had glimpsed her just the night before, but Hunter's stories had caused her to grow in Carl's memory to a raging monster, twelve feet tall.

When she shifted her large brown eyes from her brother to Carl, however, any reassurance her appearance might have caused withered. The gaze she directed at him was of pure, distilled malice, of hatred concentrated into its coldest form. He thought of Deb and Karen unhappy, of the rages they could fly into, the expressions of raw anger that would lower their brows, straighten their mouths. What was scalding him now like a jet of liquid nitrogen was the same emotion focused over decades, refined to a degree far in excess of what was humanly possible, tolerable. Briefly, he had wondered if Hunter might have misjudged his sister, misinterpreted her actions; now, he saw, his friend had not. Her eyes swung to Hunter, and it was as if Carl's skin warmed.

"You're naked," Natalie said. Her eyes narrowed, as if she was attempting to decipher the characters on Hunter's skin. Something was off about her voice; it had a worn quality, as if it had been too long at the same pitch. Carl found it simultaneously frightening and sad.

"Yeah," Hunter said. "Hi, Nat."

"Don't call me that," she said. She raised her chin. "I am Natalya, Queen of the Hungry Dogs, and you are trespassing in my kingdom. Who is this?" She pointed at Carl.

"He's a friend. He agreed to come with me on my way through here."

"Why does he have a knife?"

"To protect himself. There are some pretty scary things in these parts."

"You mean my dogs."

"Yes, I do."

“You’re right,” Natalie said, “he should be afraid of them.” She glanced behind her, and the creature at her back crept into view.

At the sight of it, Carl’s stomach dropped, and despite himself, he said, “Jesus Christ.”

The size of a big dog, a Great Dane or an Irish wolfhound, it slunk close to the floor, slender limbs out to either side like an enormous insect. Its hide was the damp white of flesh left days under a Band-Aid. Its head was awful, a pair of jaws distended by a cage of fangs the length of Carl’s hand. Eyeless, it tasted the air with a fluttering white tongue whose edges were ragged from its teeth. A low chuckle rolled from its throat. The Hungry Dog positioned itself in front of Natalie, sitting as best the awkward arrangement of its limbs would allow, and turning its monstrous head in search of the palm she laid on it. She said, “This is Sam.”

“Hi, Sam,” Hunter said.

“Don’t talk to him,” Natalie said, her words laced with contempt. “He’s mine.”

“Okay,” Hunter said, hands held out in apology, “I’m sorry.”

“They’re all mine,” Natalie said. “Now you are too.”

“Can we talk about that?”

“No.”

Left hand low, palm forward, right hand holding the knife close to his body, Carl slid next to Hunter, who said, “Are you sure? I’m going to the summer country; maybe you could come with me.”

“Why would I want to do that?”

“To see Mom and Dad.”

“Them? They let me die.”

“I don’t think that’s—”

“Shut up,” Natalie said. “When I got sick, I asked them if I was going to die. ‘Oh no,’ they said, ‘we would never let that happen.’ I did everything they told me to. I took their stupid medicine, which made me feel terrible. All my hair fell out. And it didn’t work. I died anyway. Before I did, Mom and Dad promised me I was going to heaven. ‘You’ll be lifted up by

angels,' they said, 'and brought straight to Jesus. You'll see Grandpa Hugh again.' But there weren't any angels. I didn't see Jesus, or Grandpa Hugh. I wound up here. I saw a box fort and stopped at it. I didn't know where I was. I thought I was in Hell. I didn't know why; I didn't know what I had done. For a long time, I was so scared. Then I got tired of being afraid and got mad." Natalie lifted her hand from the dog (Sam) and he lurched to his feet. She said, "I knew when Mom and Dad died. I was ready for them. I was going to show them this place. I was going to ask them why they'd lied to me. I was going to make them apologize. Only, I missed them. Both of them. I went to find them, and I couldn't. It was like they didn't want to see me. Don't you think they would have? Don't you think they would have come looking for me?"

"I'm sure they did," Hunter said. "After I returned from here—after I was resuscitated—you were the first thing Mom asked me about. 'Did you see Natalie?' she said while we were in the ambulance."

"She did?"

"Yes, really."

"What did you tell her?" Eagerness blended with Natalie's anger, softened the stern cast of her features.

"I said I'd seen you."

"Did you tell her about my kingdom?"

"No, I did not."

"Why not?"

"To be honest, I was pretty freaked out by it. I thought Mom would be too."

Natalie's face hardened. "So even if she had wanted to find me after she died, she couldn't have, because you didn't tell her the right place to look."

"Whoa," Hunter said. "Hang on a minute."

Carl didn't pick up on the exact cue Natalie employed, but he caught the dog rocking back, gathering himself to leap, and pushed in front of Hunter as the creature sprang. For an instant, the Hungry Dog hung in the air, his abundance of fangs spread wide. Ice water flooded Carl's chest. Sam drew nearer in fits and starts, as if in a series of slides caught in a stuttering projector. Somewhere inside Carl's head, a voice was saying, *Move move*

move move move. When the dog was an arm's length away, he did. Aiming for Sam's throat, he snapped the knife straight out, exhaling sharply as he twisted his right hip into the strike. The dog came in lower than he anticipated, however, and the knife drove into Sam's open mouth, piercing his tongue and lower jaw. Fangs tore Carl's hand as the dog jerked his head left in an attempt to avoid the weapon that had already wounded him. His momentum carried him into Carl, who released the knife and stumbled backward, thudding against Hunter and knocking the two of them to the floor. Sam landed next to them, thumping on his side, and immediately started wailing, a frantic cry halfway to a laugh. On his ass, Carl scooted clear of the thrashing dog, colliding with Hunter and forcing him back too.

"Dude," Hunter said when they were a safe distance, "your hand."

Carl raised it. It was bright red with blood streaming from the furrows Sam's fangs had dug in it. "Jesus." His head swam. He was aware of pain, incredible pain, astonishing pain, the moment his ravaged hand came into view, but he was more concerned that neither his thumb nor his middle finger seemed capable of movement. Nausea fought with panic in his throat.

"Holy shit," Hunter said.

At first, Carl thought his friend was commenting on his hand, until he saw what was happening to Sam. All over him, the dog's pale flesh was quivering, losing its solidity, becoming gelid, sliding partway from his limbs and torso onto the floor, then regaining its integrity and retracting up his frame. In some places, what reformed was not the shape of the Hungry Dog, but of a child, a seven- or eight-year-old, Carl would have guessed. An arm, a leg, a hand, a foot, a shock of curly red hair, a green eye wide with agony and fright, all blended with the dog's monstrous features, while he continued his laughing wail, pawing at but unable to dislodge the blade buried in his lower jaw.

"Hush," Natalie said, and Sam's cry diminished to a whimper. Mingled with his whining were sounds that might have been words; Carl thought he could pick out, "Hurts." Natalie crouched in front of the dog, her left hand on his head, her right reaching amidst his fangs to grab the handle of the knife. She murmured something to Sam, too low for Carl to hear, and tore the knife from his mouth with a downward stroke that split his lower jaw to

the throat. Carl and Hunter shouted. The halves of his jaw flapping, pinkish blood venting from his open neck, Sam reared on his mismatched hind legs and fell over. His eye rolled frantically, then fixed. He sighed, shuddered, and was still. His body began to slide apart.

"What the fuck, Nat?" Hunter said.

"You broke him," Natalie said. She dropped the knife, stood, wiped her hand on her shorts. "He'll go back to his doghouse until I can fix him."

Hunter raised himself to his feet. He held out his right hand to Carl, who took it in his left and used it to help him up from the floor. The pain from his injuries was excruciating. "How're you doing?" Hunter said.

"Have I mentioned how much this sucks?" Trying to keep the hand elevated, Carl pressed his right arm across his chest.

"You might have."

"I don't think I'm gonna be much good for anything else," Carl said. Natalie had kicked the knife away.

"That's okay. It isn't too far from here. I'm pretty sure I can make it on my own."

"You are going nowhere," Natalie said.

"Are you sure?" Carl said. "Do you know which direction you're supposed to be heading? Because I have no idea."

"I said, You are going nowhere." Natalie advanced toward them.

"Yeah, I think so," Hunter said. "Hang tight; it shouldn't be too long."

"That's assuming you succeed."

"Ever the voice of encouragement."

"I SAID, YOU ARE GOING NOWHERE." Natalie was standing beside them. This close, hatred poured from her in freezing waves. "You are mine," she continued, addressing Hunter, "and so is your friend. I rule here. What I want to happen, happens. I want both of you to suffer, so you will. There's a box waiting for you, big brother. I've been preparing it for a very long time. Maybe I'll sic what comes out of it on your friend. Maybe I'll let the dogs have him, for what he did to their brother."

"Nat—"

“Queen Natalya.”

“Yeah.” Hunter shook his head, and leaped at his sister, catching her in a tackle that brought them crashing to the floor. Almost too fast to see, Natalie twisted, planting her feet against Hunter’s chest and kicking with enough force to shove him away from her, mist rolling about him. She sprang up, ready for Carl, but he was hurrying to Hunter, who grimaced, his left arm wrapping his ribs. “Well, that worked,” Carl said, extending his left hand.

Behind him, Natalie’s voice thundered, “GIVE IT BACK!”

In his other hand, Hunter held his sister’s crown. Waving away Carl’s help, he staggered to his feet.

“GIVE IT BACK!” Trembling with fury, Natalie glared at the two of them. Loosed from the cardboard circle, strands of her hair lifted as if in a breeze. “GIVE ME MY CROWN, HUNTER!”

Hunter shook his head. “No can do, Nat.”

In response, Natalie screamed, an ear-splitting shriek which lasted longer than Carl would have thought humanly possible. Somewhere deep in the mist, a distant pack of laughs answered. “Now you’ll see,” she said. “I won’t bother putting you in your box. I’ll let the dogs get you. You’re going to be so sorry, Hunter. They’re going to hurt you so bad.”

“Thank you,” Hunter said to Carl, “for coming with me. I don’t know if I could have made it this far without you. I’m sorry about your hand.”

“That makes two of us.”

“I love you, man.”

“I love you, too. I hope you make it.”

“That makes two of us.” Crown in hand, Hunter turned left and ran.

“HEY!” Natalie shouted after him. “HEY! COME BACK HERE, HUNTER! HUNTER!”

Already, the mist was closing around him, rendering him ghostly, dulling the slap of his feet on the floor. For an instant, the strange red symbols written on him appeared to float in the air, then they faded from sight, as well.

Natalie didn’t waste any more time. Without another glance at Carl, she sprinted after her brother, her long black hair streaming behind her like a banner.

XIV

Laughter roared around Carl, raged, together with another sound, the rumble of many feet, of hundreds of feet, running at him. The floor shuddered with their approach. How many Hungry Dogs were there? Carl’s hand throbbed. If one of them left the chase, he was in trouble; two, and he was finished. *Hang tight*, Hunter had said. Easy for him to say. The laughter swelled. The floor jumped under him. *Hang tight.*

As fast as his legs would carry him, Carl ran, aiming ninety degrees from the direction in which Hunter and Natalie had vanished. Laughter pursued him, enveloped him. The floor bounced like a trampoline, throwing him into a stumble that almost sent him sprawling. To his right, a stand of birches waved like reeds in a wind. He considered sheltering in them, rejected the idea. An arm’s length in front of him, a dog loped from right to left, its head an assortment of blades. Closer still, another crossed behind him. This direction, the mist was heavier, which he supposed was equal parts to his advantage and disadvantage.

Snow rushed against him. He slowed, shielded his face with his left hand. “HUNTER!” Natalie’s voice boomed on his left, made him flinch. He quickened his pace. The Hungry Dogs’ laughter ebbed, swelled, ebbed. The shaking of the floor subsided. Ahead, someone panted with exertion. “Hunter?” Carl said. Faintly, he heard Natalie shouting, but could not decipher her words. Snow stuck to his skin, clung to his hair. At least it numbed his injuries.

His feet were starting to drag. There was something to the right, a squat form about which snow swirled. Its outline was too regular for a tree. Carl jogged over to it. Made of gray brick, it stood waist high, a foot and a half on each side. Set in its flat top was a shallow bowl of dull metal. Snow silted the bowl, spackled the column’s sides. Carl walked around it, but could see no markings on it, no hint of its purpose. One of Natalie’s creations? He couldn’t be absolutely sure, but didn’t believe so. He squatted

to study it more closely, using his left hand to balance himself. As he did, he realized his fingertips were touching not wood, but soil. Pulse leaping, he brushed his hand over the ground, confirming his discovery:

He had left Natalie's domain, and Madame Sosostris's path through it. He was lost.

XV

For a long time, Carl stood beside the brick pillar, as snow drifted against it and the blood flowing from his wounds began to freeze. He could attempt to find his way back to Natalie's kingdom, but there seemed little point in doing so. If Hunter had succeeded in escaping her, then Madame Sosostris would have performed whatever action was necessary to unlink Limbo from the world of the living, and Carl would be entering a hostile environment from which there was no escape. He did not imagine Annie would or could keep the worlds locked indefinitely—she had mentioned the tremendous power required to do so, hadn't she?—so if Hunter did not reach his goal, if Natalie caught him or if he ran off course, there would come a moment when she would have to effect the separation, anyway. Which would yield the same result of him returning to Natalie's domain, except he and Hunter would be suffering together. He could continue into this new precinct of Limbo. The brick column was evidence at least one other person inhabited or had inhabited the area. But what if that individual was as hostile as Natalie, another feral ghost? What if they were worse, at the head of their own army of monsters? He could not risk wandering further into this territory.

The snow continued.

XVI

At some point, he crouched against the brick pillar, thinking it would offer him a modicum of shelter from the elements. He supposed it did; although it sharply curtailed his view of his surroundings. He was too cold to let that sway him. How long had it been since Hunter and he had set out on their journey? A couple of hours? Was that possible? It felt as if he'd followed Hunter along the hallway out of the kitchen days ago. Attempting to

conserve body heat, he huddled tight. Could he die, here? Given that he could be hurt, it seemed likely. What would it mean, to die in the afterlife? Would he notice? Or was there some deeper level of existence waiting under this one?

His family would not know what had happened to him. Presumably, Annie would call 911 to report Hunter's lifeless body. One look at the empty pill bottle beside it would tell the cops how he had exited his life, while a conversation with Hunter's doctor would explain why. No doubt, the investigating officers would have plenty of questions for Annie, but Carl didn't think she'd have any trouble answering them. He was less certain how she'd respond when they asked about the owner of the other car parked in the driveway. Her best option would be to hew as close to events as she could, to admit she didn't know. In short order, what started as a call about the death of a famous photojournalist, apparently at his own hand, would have developed into a missing person case involving his long-term friend, the owner of a shotokan karate studio in Beacon.

What would the cops assume had happened to him? More importantly, what would Melanie think? She would have leaped in the car the instant the call to her ended. An accident would seem the most reasonable explanation. In this version of events, he went for a walk in the woods surrounding his friend's house and suffered some kind of mishap, tripped, fell, knocked himself unconscious, then froze to death in the storm. A heart attack would work as well, despite a clean bill of health at his last checkup. The lack of any trace of his body on Hunter's grounds would lead to the search being expanded to neighboring properties, possibly down to Lake Champlain, whose cold waters would offer a compelling explanation for the absence of his remains. The cops might posit he had slipped and fallen into the lake. How long would it be until the search was called off, suspended? What would the official verdict be? Missing, presumed dead? Yet the coincidence of him vanishing at the same time his friend ended his life would lend his disappearance an aspect of mystery which would birth conspiracy theories as quickly as the internet could midwife them. The prospect was almost enough to bend his mouth into a smile, except that the same open-endedness would haunt Melanie and the girls.

From Carl, from Dad, names which over a lifetime had become synonyms for stolid, calm (if unexciting), dependable (if forgetful), the man who had been one quarter of the family would assume a new identity, or rather, lack of identity. He would become a cipher, a blank onto which Melanie, Deb, and Karen would write whatever anxieties and doubts they'd had about their relationships with him. Melanie would fear he had left her for a new life with another woman, one of the younger black belts whose fawning she teased him about. Deb and Karen would worry they'd been abandoned by a father who had only ever feigned interest in them and their lives. With time, perhaps the girls would accept that he had died in an accident which had hidden his body, but he doubted Melanie would. She would know something was not right about his vanishing; the low-level marital telepathy they had developed over their decades together would tell her the situation was off. Would she seek out Madame Sosostris, demand more of an answer than the woman had provided the police? And suppose Annie acquiesced to her request, told her everything? What then? Assuming Melanie didn't take Annie as either lying or insane, what could she do? What options could Annie offer her? Without the power she had drawn from Natalie, she could not access this place. The best Melanie could expect was to know her husband was forever lost to her. Grief for her, for what she had not learned she already had lost, shot through him like a steel pin fixing an insect to a board.

Nearby, footsteps crunched in his direction. Wondering if Hunter had failed in his efforts and had managed to track him here, he raised his head. But no, he did not recognize the young man advancing toward him. For one thing, he was clothed, wearing a peach dress shirt, charcoal slacks, and black loafers. For another, everything about him, the colors of his clothes, the tone of his skin, even the shine of his eyes, glowed with a rich light, as if the midday sun were shining full on him. The man's expression, however, indicated he knew Carl. Squinting at the snow pelting his face, the man approached Carl until he was standing over him. In a pleasant voice, he said, "Your ride's here, kiddo. Time to go."

XVII

"Who are you?" Carl said through chattering teeth.

“The gift horse you’re looking in the mouth.”

“I’m sorry,” he said, bracing himself against the pillar as he struggled to stand, his legs complaining as they unbent. “It’s just—”

“Your friend’s sister, yes.”

“You know about her?”

“Some.”

“Can you tell me if Hunter got away from her?”

The young man shook his handsome head. “I can’t. What I can offer you is a way out of here.”

“Is this a trick?”

“This is not a trick.”

“Then why are you doing this?” Sudden suspicion widened his eyes. “Are you an angel? A god? God?”

The young man burst into hearty laughter. “That’s terrific,” he said. “What a difference a change of clothes makes, I swear.” Noting the blend of consternation and embarrassment on Carl’s face, he added, “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have expected you to know me. The last time you saw me, I was in considerably worse shape. Actually, the last time you saw me, I was lying in the coffin in the Miskowski Funeral Home in Fishkill.”

Here, Carl realized, was Wayne Ahuja, his older brother’s friend, dead these many years, one of the multitude consumed by AIDS and its attendant infections. The delay in his recognition was understandable. Even before his sickness, Wayne had been skinny, the type of kid, it was joked, who had to stand in the same place twice to cast a shadow, who had to run around in the shower to get wet. In contrast, the man in front of him had the robust dimensions of an Olympic swimmer. He wore vitality with the same ease as his immaculately tailored shirt. Nor did the difference end there. When Carl had known him, Wayne had been reserved, guarded, a consequence of being out at a time and in a place whose attitudes were struggling to advance. This Wayne was suffused with self-confidence. It was as if he was seeing Wayne not as he would have been had he lived, but as the best possible self he could have been. Wonder and bewilderment competed to find their way into speech; what emerged from Carl’s mouth was a compromise: “Why?”

“Are you saying you want to stay here?”

“No,” Carl said, “no, no, of course not. It’s—I don’t understand. I thought I was trapped in this place.”

“I supposed it does seem a little *deus-ex-machina*-y, doesn’t it? Just when all hope seems lost, the handsome ghost from your past swoops in to rescue you. Well, more like, trudges across a snowy waste, but you get the picture. It’s because of that,” Wayne said, pointing at Carl’s torn right hand. “Blood was spilled. Whenever that happens in this neck of the woods, it creates all kinds of opportunities.”

“Like what?”

“Don’t ask. Be glad your friend’s sister didn’t know about it, or she wouldn’t have spent two seconds on him.” Wayne turned to the pillar, on top of which a couple of inches of snow had accumulated. With the flat of his hand, he swept it clear, then scooped out the snow remaining in the metal bowl. He waved to Carl. “Give me your hand. No, the injured one.”

Carl removed his hand from its position against his shoulder and held it out. Wayne took it in his warm grasp and guided it over the bowl. Rotating the wrist this way and that, he inspected Carl’s mostly frozen wounds. “I’m sorry about this,” he said, and squeezed Carl’s hand tightly.

Pain burned his fingers and palm. He yelped, went to jerk away, but Wayne’s grip did not lessen. From numb, Carl’s hand was aflame, flesh and bones luminescent. Fresh blood streamed from the grooves in his skin and pattered onto the bowl, striking it with a tinny music. “That should do,” Wayne said, and released him.

“Fuck!” Carl said, cradling his reinjured hand.

“Again, I apologize.” Wayne peered at the bowl, watching Carl’s blood slide down its sides into a crimson bubble. The blood quivered, elongated, shooting up the bowl’s curve in a straight line. Wayne pointed in the direction it indicated, about twenty degrees to their left. “This way,” he said.

Snow whirled around them. “There’s a hell of a lot more walking in the afterlife than I expected,” Carl said.

Wayne chuckled. “It isn’t far.”

“Can I ask you something?”

“You want to know what it’s like.”

“Heaven, yeah. Hunter called it the summer country.”

“What makes you think that’s where I come from?”

“You didn’t?” Carl glanced at him.

“No, I’m teasing you,” Wayne said. “If your friend reaches it, he’ll be happy.”

“I would hope so, after all this.”

They proceeded in silence for a minute or two, until Carl said, “That’s it?”

“That’s it.”

In front of them, a low wall made of flat black stones layered thigh high barred the way. “Here we are,” Wayne said. “Do you think you can get over this on your own, or do you need a hand?”

The stones were a single layer deep. Carl stepped across with a minimum of effort.

“And there’s my answer,” Wayne said. “All right. Continue straight on and you should see your destination in about five minutes.”

“Thank you,” Carl said. “I wish I could come up with something better to say.”

“You’re welcome.”

“I still don’t understand why you were the one who came for me. Not that I’m complaining; I just wondered.”

“Do you remember the last conversation we had?”

“Yes. You told me about wanting to go to Paris.”

“That was a bad day. A horrible day. I was in a lot of pain, and I was starting to understand I didn’t have much longer. All the stuff about France had been such a central part of who I was, how I saw myself, and it was going to be lost, to go down to the grave with me. I was depressed and I was afraid. You allowed me to talk about something I loved one more time—for the final time, as it turned out. It was comforting, at a time when comfort was in short supply. For my remaining days, I appreciated that.

“Plus, you did a good thing for your friend. I admire that. I could help you, so I did. You get a Get-Out-of-Jail-Free card. Why not, right?”

“No argument here,” Carl said. “One last thing?”

“Yes?”

“If you happen to see my friend—Hunter—tell him I’m glad he made it.”

“Should I see him, I will.”

“Thanks.”

“Go home,” Wayne said.

Carl did.

XVIII

More like ten minutes after he departed Wayne, Carl noticed the mist thinning, disclosing the trunks of trees around him. The snow had not let up; indeed, it had gained in intensity, accompanied by a wind that sliced through him to the bone. Carl advanced to one of the trees, saw that it was a red pine, and his heart lifted in his chest. Moving from evergreen to evergreen, he continued forward. The wind whipped away the last of the mist. He was walking through the woods lining the driveway to Hunter’s house; through the blowing snow and the trees, he could see his Subaru, and beyond it, the steps climbing the slope to the house’s front door.

A tremendous wave of emotion rose in Carl, sent tears flooding his cheeks. The snow, the trees, the car, glowed in his sight, suffused with beauty. The wave broke, became joy and relief and a fierce love for the world and everyone in it. The snowflakes were a miracle, the trees astonishing, the car a work of art. He could not contain himself: He broke into a run toward the house, where his old friend’s body lay on the bed in the master bedroom, an unreadable expression on its cooling face.

Epilogue

The surgery to repair Carl’s hand took place at the UVM Medical Center. He had blamed his injuries on an attack by a stray dog he’d encountered when he went outside to practice his *kata*. The explanation was simple

enough to repeat to the police convincingly; although it necessitated a series of rabies shots he couldn't refuse and maintain the illusion. The doctor who treated him at the ER strongly recommended operating as soon as possible, which opinion the surgeon on call endorsed. Already on her way up, Melanie met him at the hospital, where a slot had opened early the following morning. "Holy crap," she said when she saw the bandages wrapping his hand. "A dog did this?"

Although he hated lying to her, Carl said, "Yeah. It was the craziest thing." Which was perhaps not as much a lie as he had thought.

After the surgery, while he was in the recovery area, surrounded by tall green curtains through which various nurses came to check his vitals, Hunter appeared to him. Melanie had ducked out to run to the cafeteria for a cup of coffee and a snack. Carl was lying with his eyes shut, riding in and out of consciousness. He heard the curtain rings jingle, felt someone sit on the end of the bed. He assumed it was Melanie, but when he opened his eyes, saw Hunter. Still unclothed, his skin still a canvas for the red figures, Hunter was wearing Natalie's cardboard crown, perched unsteadily atop his larger head. On the floor beside him, a Hungry Dog sat awkwardly, its head an elongated wedge.

Carl was aware that he should be terrified, but whatever drugs were coursing through his system dulled the emotion to a mild concern. He said, "You're still naked."

"Yeah," Hunter said.

"I take it this means the plan failed."

"No," Hunter said, "it didn't."

"Then why are you here?"

"I couldn't do it." Hunter looked down. "I made it. We made it; Natalie chased me all the way there. We must've made some sight, me running bare-assed down the middle of this cobbled street, her hot on my heels, screaming her head off. She finally brought me down, started punching and kicking me. I wouldn't let go of this, though." He pointed to the crown.

"Wait," Carl said. "Heaven has cobbled streets?"

“This part does. You know what it reminded me of? Have you ever been to St. Andrew’s, in Scotland?”

“Heaven is like Scotland?”

“I’m sure the Scots would agree with that. It’s not important. Anyway, there we are, me on the cobblestones, Natalie beating the shit out of me, and the next thing, there are people in the street. I want to say they were there all along, it just took us a minute to see them. I don’t know what the hell that means, either. Their clothes were these incredible colors… I can’t say exactly how, but they separate the two of us, form a circle around Natalie. She’s furious; she’s shouting at the crowd, running up to and pushing them, punching a couple. They don’t react. Or, they don’t react the way you would expect. They talk to her, reassure her, tell her it’s okay, everything’s all right. As they do, they’re doing this thing with their hands.” Hunter mimed moving his back and forth, as if he were playing tug of war and drawing the rope to him. “I’m thinking I should run, escape my sister while I have the opportunity, but I can’t stop watching. I swear, I can almost see these people drawing something out of Natalie, like long, silvery webs. Eventually, she goes from running around inside the circle, to standing still, to sitting, then she lies down and falls asleep right there in the middle of the street. Some members of the group leave, others keep on with the hand stuff.

“I was so relieved; I can’t tell you. A woman approached me, said we should see about getting me settled. ‘What about my sister?’ I said. ‘Oh, her, too,’ she said. Just like that. As if Nat hadn’t been this raging monster.

“And it hits me, what about the Hungry Dogs? I’m thinking about Sam, about what we saw happen to him. I’m thinking about I don’t know how many of these creatures, these kids, there without their queen. I’m thinking about what I’ve witnessed with Natalie. If there’s a way to, I don’t know, get her back from whatever she had transformed into, then shouldn’t there be a way to reclaim them, too? But who’s gonna do that? I can’t bring Natalie out there, and I can’t ask any of these people I don’t know. I can’t say it isn’t my problem, because… well, I can’t. How could I enjoy this place knowing this pack of kids was wandering around the box fort, wondering what happened? I asked the woman I was talking to if she could

help my sister, could connect her with our parents. She said she would, so I put the crown on my head and set off the way we'd come.

"It wasn't hard to find the path back to Natalie's kingdom. Once I arrived, most of the dogs avoided me. I could see they recognized the crown, but had no idea what it meant for me to be wearing it. A few approached me, but this guy," Hunter nodded at the dog at his feet, "was the only one to stay. So far. I can't say why, but I think his name is Rudy."

"Hi, Rudy," Carl said.

The dog stared at him blankly.

"Although I could be wrong," Hunter said.

"How are you planning to retrieve them?" Carl said. "Who they were?"

"I have no idea," Hunter said. "If Natalie could transform them into these things, then I figure there's a way to return them to who they used to be. I just have to find it."

"Sounds like it could take some time."

"It's not as if I'm doing anything else." The bed creaked as Hunter stood. So did the Hungry Dog (Rudy?). "Okay, I just wanted to drop by, check on you. I don't foresee myself having a lot of adult conversations in the immediate future." He moved toward the green curtain.

"Be careful," Carl said.

"I'm already dead."

"And for God's sake, get some pants, Your Majesty."

"Kiss my ass, peasant."

The curtain rings sang, the dog's claws clicked on the floor, and Carl was alone. When Melanie returned, she saw her husband wiping his eyes with the back of his unbandaged hand, but she did not ask him about it, not then.

"And if he were wrong, well, what would be the harm in that? Better to be wrong forever than to live without hope."—Lucius Shepard, "Limbo"

Oscar Returns from the Dead, Prophesizing

First published in *Spirits Unwrapped* (October 2019)

Not yet available in this collection.

Muse

First published in *Children of the Fang and Other Genealogies* (August 2020)

Not yet available in this collection.

Zombies in Marysville

First published in *Children of the Fang and Other Genealogies* (August 2020)

Not yet available in this collection.

Gripped

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Also published in *Children of the Fang and Other Genealogies* (August 2020)

For Joe Pulver

This was maybe ’91 or ’92. The economy losing its footing, stumbling into recession, the glories of the Gulf War receded in the national rearview. The turn of the century—of the millennium—no longer a description of past events, but a predictor of things on the way, less than a decade’s distance. Across central Europe, groups manacled by toppled tyrants massaged raw wrists, regarding one another from the corners of their eyes while reaching for the knives. HIV-AIDS rampaged through the bloodstreams of young and old, rich and poor, celebrity and nobody.

Joe was working as a bouncer at the End Zone, a strip club in Latham. Most of his job consisted of taking money at the door and maintaining a generally hostile expression to everyone who handed him cash, from the college boys up from SUNYA, down from Sienna, or over from RPI, to the truckers and businessmen in town for the night, to the assorted regulars, most of whom knew how to circumvent the club’s no-alcohol policy by gulping from their bottles in their cars in the parking lot. He kept the camo patrol cap on because it added to his bellicose appearance, and when he inclined his head forward the bill made it more difficult for the customers to be sure where he was looking. Even in the club’s air-conditioned atmosphere, his denim jacket rapidly grew humid, but it lent a good ten pounds to him, and he figured the bigger he seemed, the less chance there was of a random asshole trying anything with him. Plus, the jacket’s pockets were capacious enough to hold a flask of rye on the right and a dog-eared paperback of French poetry on the left. The liquor, he treated himself to after locking the club’s door behind the last patron to exit. The verse, he read as the alcohol’s heat spread from his stomach and the girls changed into their regular clothes and prepared to leave. He murmured the French:

“*Comme je descendais des Fleuves impassibles*,” “*La lune s’attristait*,” “*A la fin tu es las de ce monde ancien*.” When it was time for the girls to go, he walked those who did not have rides waiting for them to their cars.

He encountered less trouble than he’d been warned to expect by the man who hired him. In most cases, his arrival was enough to put a stop to whatever bullshit was in progress—usually, a guy who couldn’t or wouldn’t get the message that the dancer he was crowding wanted him gone. Every so often, he found it necessary to grip the arm of the offender high on the bicep and steer him to another part of the club, up to and including the front door. Although plenty of customers played tough, thrusting out their chests and glaring at him, they were roosters, showing off for the other cocks. The only one who truly made him nervous, to the point he retrieved the aluminum bat he’d propped behind his stool at the front door, was a short guy with curly red hair and a van dyke who entered one afternoon not just drunk but angry drunk, his face flushed, his eyes sparked bright by an altercation with his girlfriend, or the woman he thought was his girlfriend, from what Joe overheard of the tirade the man unloaded on Kelly, the bartender, and then to the mirror behind the bar. Before he was done with his speech, he grabbed the empty glass in front of him and smashed it onto his forehead. When he stumbled off his seat, blood was streaming down his face, shards of glass shining in his hair. He opened his mouth and screamed, a howl of frustration and rage that turned all the heads in the room his direction and sent Joe hurrying for the baseball bat. His fingers had just closed on it when the man burst into tears and sat down on the floor. Kelly was already on the phone to 911, and although Joe hustled to where the man was sitting, the situation was over. During the five minutes the Sheriff’s deputies took to arrive, the man screamed twice more, but no one paid attention to him. That night, Joe remained in the club after the last girl had departed, smoking his way through a pack of Marlboros and reading Baudelaire: “*Dans des terrains cendreux, calcinés, sans verdure, / Comme je me plaignais un jour à la nature*.” As dawn was bloodying the horizon, he crept into the backseat of his Dodge and plummeted into dreams of men with glass studding their skin.

A week after that, Joe had his encounter with the shirtless guy. It was closing time, the last girl left from the stage, the music switched off, the

house lights raised. Joe had thought all the customers were gone. But when he glanced at the stage, he saw a lone figure seated on one of the chairs that lined it. One sneakered foot propped on the railing that ran the stage's perimeter, the guy had pushed his chair up on two legs. *Didn't your mother ever tell you*, Joe thought. At some point after entering the club, the guy had doffed whatever shirt he'd worn in, which had escaped Joe's notice—odd, because if there was one thing the patrons of a strip club were absolutely obliged to do, it was to remain clothed, themselves. The guy was skinny, but his flesh was roped with muscle. None of the girls had mentioned a ride waiting for them inside, so it was likely Mr. Shirtless was waiting to surprise one of them with his attentions. Joe approached quickly and quietly. He considered kicking the guy's chair out from under him, but on the off-chance he wasn't there for some nefarious purpose, Joe opted for the usual bicep grab, ready to ease the guy to the floor should he startle and topple the chair.

Instead of closing on the man's arm, however, Joe's fingers grasped the man's right hand. In a move whose serpentine specifics happened too fast for him to follow, the guy corkscrewed to his feet and twisted to catch Joe's grip in his. Joe's brow lowered, his frown becoming a grimace as the shirtless man tightened his hold. The guy couldn't weight more than one-fifty, and that was assuming you threw in the sneakers and black corduroys hanging from his hips, but he possessed circus-strongman strength. As best he could, Joe returned the pressure, but it was no contest. The man squeezed his hand, pain lighting Joe's arm as his bones gave to the brink of breaking. No telling what the guy's next move was going to be, but if it was preceded by breaking Joe's hand, it couldn't be anything good. The baseball bat was hopelessly out of reach; Joe clenched his left hand and brought it back for a roundhouse.

And the guy released him and stepped away, hands open and up. "Well," he said, "I guess I should be going."

"Yeah," Joe said once he could catch his breath. "I guess you should." In the combined relief and pain that rushed over him, he saw that the guy was older than he'd first taken him for, at least his age. He had a tattoo of some kind on his right shoulder, a figure Joe didn't recognize, done in jaundiced ink. Rubbing his right hand with his left, he walked the shirtless man to the

front door and out into the parking lot. He wanted to watch this guy get into his vehicle, start it, and drive away from here.

The man took half a dozen steps across the gravel, stopped, and turned. There was a cigarette Joe hadn't seen him roll or light between his lips. "Almost forgot," he said. He reached his left hand behind him. When he brought it around front, it was holding a pistol, a black automatic Joe had failed to notice tucked into the guy's waistline as he trailed him. The man held the gun by the bottom of the grip, dangling it upside down. "Here," he said, holding the weapon out to Joe, "take it."

He couldn't see how a gun in this guy's possession was a good idea. He caught the pistol with his left hand and the man released it. "Two bullets," the guy said, holding up the index and middle fingers of his right hand.

"Two," Joe said. "Why? For what?"

"You'll know."

Joe slid the gun into his jacket. He heard gravel crunching, looked up to the sight of the shirtless man striding out of the parking lot and along the shoulder of the road. Before Joe lost sight of him behind the silhouette of the auto parts place next door, the guy shouted something at him Joe couldn't distinguish. It sounded French; something to do with Carcassonne, maybe.

His right hand hurt for days, to the point he considered a visit to the emergency room. He opted to increase his intake of rye. It didn't help, nor did the painkillers Kelly slipped him. What reduced if not relieved the pain he discovered one night he was playing with a ballpoint pen. Silver, the kind with the button on one end you click to extend and lock the point, and again to release and retract it, it had been left behind by one of the customers. Doubtful the owner was going to return for it, but Joe had it at his place at the front door, just in case. Bones aching, he pressed the button over and over—until, prompted by a sudden and ferocious impulse, he dug the book of French poetry out of his pocket and opened it to the inside back cover. His hand felt as if it was filled with fire. He pressed the tip of the pen to the blank surface, and started to write.

The room wheeled. High overhead, the moon rolled across the sky, crashing through the stars, cracking the firmament. The pen drove across

the paper. Cities shuddered, burst, collapsed in glittering ruin. Across a great distance, someone was speaking. Joe leaned forward to hear what was being said.

Vista

First published in *Children of the Fang and Other Genealogies* (August 2020)

Not yet available in this collection.

Slippage

First published in *Children of the Fang and Other Genealogies* (August 2020)

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